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Open Range

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—A ROMANCE OF THE BITTER DAYS
WHEN THE FLEECE OF SHEEP CAUSED CATTLE-
MEN TO SEE RED

By George M. Johnson

VIRGINIA STIRLING stepped to the door of her ranch, the Bar Y Bar, in time to greet a rider just as he was swinging down from his mount. The girl's lips parted in a smile of welcome.

"Look who's here!" she cried gayly. "An unexpected honor, so early in the morning, and everything!" But there was no answering smile on the features of Buck Strachan as he soberly returned her salutation.

"Why so melancholy, fair sir?" Virginia inquired lightly. "You look as solemn as a little boy with the mumps. What in the world has happened?"

"I been worrying about you, Virginia," Buck replied.

"Now that's real sweet of you. It's nice to have some one worried about me; makes me feel important. But truly, I didn't know my affairs deserved it. Buck up, Buck! Things may not be so bad after all."

"I don't exactly know what you'd call bad," Buck explained, "but I'm supposed to warn you to keep your sheep to the Bar Y Bar from now on. The cattlemen had a meeting yesterday, and they've declared war on the sheep growers, including you. My dad and John Lindsley are backing the play. They mean business, Virginia."

A chill gleam replaced the light which had danced in the girl's eyes. When she spoke her voice was dangerously calm.

"What do they call this grazing land which lies between my ranch and the foothills, Buck?"

"Why, folks speak of it as the open range," he answered unguardedly.

"Why do they call it the open range?"

"Because it— Now, look-a-here, Virginia! You don't want to hop on me about it. I ain't ordering your woollies off the range." Buck spoke in an aggrieved tone. "I got up on my hind laigs in the meeting they had and told 'em to lay off you."

"But at that there ain't much I can do," he added regretfully. "What I said was mainly bluff, and I judge they took it that way."

"I didn't mean to blame you, Buck. And thank you just the same for your efforts."

"Won't you listen to reason, Virginia?" he suddenly pleaded. "Why can't we get married? I've got enough so we could stock the ranch here with cattle. They's going to be nothing but trouble ahead for anybody that raises sheep. What do you say, Virginia?"

The girl's worried glance wandered off toward the sawtooth mountains, blue in the haze of distance.

"I'm sorry, Buck. But it's impossible. I like you awfully well, but—not well enough for what you want, I'm afraid. It's so hard to explain. Perhaps—some day—I'll feel different. I don't know."

"You do care for me, Virginia? A little bit?"

"You know I do, Buck."

"Then won't you do this much to please me? Won't you sell out your sheep? Makes it mighty hard for me to be in love with a sheep raiser."

"No one's compelling you to be in love with a sheep raiser," Virginia reminded him.

"How 'm I going to help it, when you're so daw-goned sweet to look at? But I was thinking of you more'n me. Sheep growers are likely to be mighty unpopular in this section."

"Times and conditions are changing, Buck. Man has to change with them—or lose. But the cattlemen are too blind to see it."

"Things have changed, all right," Buck agreed bitterly. "First the buffalo. They never hurt the range, nor did the steers that took their place. But sheep are different. Pretty soon they won't even be grass enough for the jack rabbits."

"I don't see why you want to marry me," the girl murmured. "We'd never get on together, Buck."

"You'd see it my way if we were partners. Won't you sell out and take me on? Ought to be steers on the Bar Y Bar. It was a famous brand once, and old Cal Bowers, the first man that registered it, would likely turn over in his grave if he knew what had happened to his place."

"Suppose I promised to marry you,

Buck, provided you'd join me in the sheep growing," the girl rejoined. "What would you say to that?"

He flushed in silent misery.

"Have a heart, Virginia!" he protested. "That's a terrible proposition to put up to a chap raised a cowboy."

"If you really loved me, you'd do it," she ruthlessly pursued.

"And if you really loved me you wouldn't ask it," he countered.

"Probably not. Never mind, Buck. You don't have to make the choice. I wasn't putting it actually up to you."

"But you'll keep your sheep off the open range?"

"Indeed I'll not!" Virginia flared. "Open range! Open to the cattle baron! But to me or any person who wishes to graze sheep, it's the closed range; closed by order of His Imperial Majesty the Cattle King! I've as much right to the grass as they have, and I intend to exercise my rights. You may be interested to know that I sent a herder out this very morning—with three hundred head. And what are the cattlemen going to do about it?"

"I dunno," was Buck's gloomy retort. "Looks to me like you're hunting trouble, and that's a thing it's never hard to locate. I'll do what I can for you, but I ain't promising it 'll be very much."

"What am I to expect from your friends?"

"Nothing for a spell—two, three days, that is. After that, *quien sabe?* They were counting on me to swing you around. But don't shut your pretty eyes to facts, Virginia. These men mean business. If the sheep don't go, they do. They're sure of that. And from what I heard yesterday most of 'em are planning to stay for quite some time."

Far in the distance appeared a dust cloud, stirred up by a rider approaching at full gallop. In silence they watched.

"It's Juan," Virginia said after a brief space. Her features darkened with added worry. "I wonder what's happened."

The horseman, a young Mexican, rode up, throwing himself from his steaming mount.

"Alas, *señorita!*" he cried. "The sheep!" He broke off with an expressive gesture.

"What is it, Juan?" Virginia gasped.

"I drive the sheep as you command me, *señorita*; along the edge of the Arroyo

Seco. Of a sudden cowboys appear. They yell and shoot. Behold, *señorita!*" He bared his right arm to disclose a blue scar where a bullet had clipped him.

"How many riders were they?" Buck snapped.

"*Señor*, I hardly know. Not many. Not more than three or four, maybe, but enough. They have those poor sheep trapped on the rim of the cañon. The animals, they are blind with terror at the pistol shots and the yells. You know the cliffs, *señor*; how steep they are!" The boy shrugged his shoulders, as if further description were unnecessary.

"Stampeded 'em over the edge, eh," Buck remarked angrily. "Believe me, Virginia, somebody's going to suffer for this."

"Aren't you proud of your associates, Buck?" she demanded hotly. "You ought to be. Such an achievement!"

"I had John Lindsley's word," Buck muttered. "He didn't start this, nor any of dad's riders, either. But likely some of the others was too hot-headed to wait. I'm going to make it my business to find the fellows responsible and hand 'em some hot lead." Quickly he swung to his horse.

"How will that help me?" the girl asked. "It won't bring my poor sheep back to life." Her eyes filled with tears, her fists were clenched. "What beasts men are!" she choked.

"Oh—" Virginia's voice broke in a sob, and she abruptly turned toward the ranch door. Buck stared sorrowfully after her, started to follow, then changed his mind.

"This is what I'd call a hell of a mess," he muttered darkly, wheeled his horse and rode away.

Virginia Stirling was not a Westerner by birth. Her only brother had bought the Bar Y Bar at the death of the former owner, but, through inexperience and mismanagement, allowed the property to become badly run down. He had died quite suddenly several years before, leaving the place to Virginia, who was then living in the East.

An uncle, Timothy Woodford, in the near-by town of Black Butte, Virginia's legal guardian, was appointed administrator of the estate—such as it was. Woodford was a lawyer with a rather limited practice; he also had certain mining and ranching interests, from which he was believed to derive a fair income.

Virginia went West after her brother's death, planning to restore the ranch. On the advice of Woodford, she stocked the place with sheep, although, in justice to Woodford, it should be added that he warned her that opposition might develop from cattle growers if the sheep ran beyond her boundary lines.

Virginia was an extremely high spirited and independent young person. It seemed to her outrageous that the cattlemen should assert proprietorship over land to the use of which they had no more claim than she.

"I'll graze my sheep wherever I please," Virginia told herself defiantly, and this she proceeded to do.

For some time she met no opposition, mainly because the cattlemen were slow in waking up to the realization that a serious invasion had been started. To a lesser degree Buck Strachan might have been responsible. His father was influential and powerful, and the young man's open designs upon Virginia could not be without effect on various ranchers.

But other newcomers followed her example. Sheep were increasing everywhere, and the cattlemen, roused at last to their danger, were prepared to go the limit in protection of what they conceived to be their just rights.

II

Down the old cattle trail that bordered the South Fork came a solitary rider. He was young—not above five and twenty—yet there was nothing about his youth to hint at inexperience.

His lithe sureness in the saddle, the cool glance from fearless, appraising eyes, the firmness of his smooth shaven chin—all sufficed to tell the curious beholder that here was a man born to the range. Little wrinkles about the corners of eyes and mouth indicated a shrewd sense of humor, as if he would much rather smile than frown; a man never unappreciative of a joke, even though on himself.

But, if one looked more closely, there was a vague something hidden away in the depths of those smiling eyes that warned against taking undue advantage of their owner's good nature.

His horse resembled the rider in build—slim, lean, and hard as nails; in color a rich chestnut, save for the right hip, which bore a broad splash of white, roughly suggestive of a crescent moon.

The cowboy flipped away a cigarette, after one final luxurious inhaling of the fragrant smoke, and sang to himself:

"Oh, the hinges are of leather and the windows
have no glass,
And the roof lets in the sunshine and the rain;
And I hear the hungry coyote as he slinks up
through the grass,
Round my little old sod shanty on the plain."

The song suddenly ceased, as the puncher rounded a bend in the trail. The confused bleating of many sheep came to his ears. The river flats below were covered by a large flock.

"What do you know about that!" he demanded, pulling in his mount. "Sheep! Daw-gone their greasy hides! Here's another section of range gone wrong. Chances don't appear none too good for a job for us, do they, bronc? The West ain't what it used to be."

The lone rider felt all the disgust of his kind at this evidence of the dawn of a new era, for the advent of sheep meant an end to the cowboy's existence. A scowl drove away the pleasant crinkles about his mouth and eyes, as he swung wide to avoid the detested sheep and their equally detested herders.

A mile or two farther on three riders came dashing up out of the river bottom brush to intercept him, the newcomer checking his horse to a walk while waiting their approach. For an instant the three and the lone horseman faced one another, the air pregnant with hostility. The leader of the trio was a coarse-featured, heavy-set man of about forty, his harsh face stamped with lines of cruelty.

"What's your name, stranger?" he demanded abruptly.

"My friends call me Larry Wilson," was the crisp rejoinder.

"Huh! And what might your enemies call you, then?"

"They call me Mr. Wilson—when I'm around to hear."

"Cocky, ain't you?" the interrogator sneered. "Where you from?"

The frown on Wilson's face deepened. He seemed pondering whether to resent this inquisition now—or to let it go further to see what might perchance develop.

"I been coming along the South Fork," he at length rejoined, in deceptive mildness.

"Humph!" a porcine sort of grunt.

"Just what I expected. You must have come with that flock of sheep, and here's

where you stop. You can turn your cayuse around and start back. We want no sheep and no renegade cow-punchers blowing in on us from outside. I'm telling you, fellow, for your own good."

Approached in a more diplomatic fashion, Larry Wilson would cheerfully have given an account of himself, proving that he was, and always had been, a steer wrangler, with no fondness for sheep or those responsible for them. But now a dull fury began to seethe in his veins. Among his acquaintances Larry had the reputation of being an easy man to get along with—up to a certain limit. That limit had been passed.

"Look here, *hombre*," he snapped. "You're riding the wrong cayuse now. I ain't taking orders from you! Savvy?"

The big fellow's answer to this challenge was a swift snap of his right hand toward the Colt on his hip. Quick though it was, his move was too slow. Before his weapon was half drawn, Larry held him covered.

Not one of the trio was conscious of seeing a movement; it seemed that the heavy gun had sprouted there of its own volition. The jaw of the bully dropped in astonishment, while Larry's voice cut the air incisively, from behind the yawning muzzle of his forty-five.

"You want to ride herd on yourself, big boy, and get in a lot of practice," he stated grimly, "that is, before you try that little game on me again. My finger's fair to middling steady now, but next time it might be nervous and twitchy, sort of. This gun's got a powerful easy trigger pull, too. It don't take much to excite her, and when the old girl does r'ar up and snort, hell's sure popping. Get me, *hombre*?"

The big man made no rejoinder.

"Just one more verbal token of esteem before we part. I'm a cow-puncher—no sheep tender—and I'm proud to state that right now I'm a better puncher than you ever were at your best, by which remark I don't aim to praise myself so much as to put you in your proper location. I ain't got any more use for sheep than you have. But if I thought it would hurt your feelings, daw-gone me if I wouldn't consider taking a job wrangling muttons. That's how I feel about you, *hombre*. Now *adios*, all of you. Do what you told me awhile back. Turn your nags around, and travel."

For the space of twenty seconds their glances clashed, Larry's discomfited an-

tagonist prudently making no move to pull his half drawn revolver farther from its holster. The cowboys who accompanied him displayed little enthusiasm for backing his play; their attitude expressed strict neutrality, together with an ungrudging admiration of the gun artistry Larry had exhibited for their benefit.

The range bully at length shifted his glance from the uncompromising glare of Larry's eyes, which were narrowed to two thin slits, but yet not so narrow that the big man failed to sense the perils lurking behind that gaze. Without a word he shoved his gun back as token of defeat, whirled his horse, and retreated, followed by his two silent companions.

Larry watched their departure, sheathing his revolver with a contemptuous grunt.

"Well, that's that, Pete hoss. Somehow I'm feeling a sight perter than I was. Nothing like excitement to tone up a chap when he's low."

The frown disappeared, chased away by the humor crinkles. Larry chuckled heartily.

"That four-flushing hyena sure looked demoralized. Ho, hum, but I'm dry!

"If the ocean was whisky,
And I was a duck,
I'd dive to the bottom
To get one sweet sup.
But the ocean ain't whisky,
And I ain't a duck,
So I'll straddle my cayuse,
And ride till sunup.

"Come on, you Pete hoss. Shake your legs. They's a town over beyond, and you'll have a chance to bury your nose in a box of real feed. And me? Say, hoss, four fingers of hooch would look like four million dollars. Let's go!

"Sift along, boys, don't ride so slow;
Ain't much time, but a long way to go.
Quirt 'im in the shoulders and rake 'im down
the hip;
I've cut you toppy mounts, boys, now pair off
and rip.

Bunch the herd at the old meet;
Then beat 'em on the tail.
Whip 'em up and down the sides,
And hit the shortest trail."

It was a middling lively evening over at Black Butte that night. Bars were crowded, and games of chance flourished.

Larry Wilson lounged beside the bar of a place which proclaimed itself the Cowboy's Home, his fingers toying with a glass of

liquor. He had as yet seen only a single familiar face since arriving in town—one of the two riders who had witnessed his victory over the range bully down on the South Fork that afternoon, although no glance of recognition had passed between them. Wilson had appraised his late antagonist as probably the foreman of some ranch, the two cowboys as riders in the outfit.

In spite of his indolent pose, Larry was keenly alive to all that went on in the room. Just now he was quietly studying, with interest and considerable curiosity, a certain individual. The object of his scrutiny was obviously an outsider, as much out of place in that gathering as one of the cow-punchers would have been east of the Mississippi River—a slightly built, blond-haired chap of uncertain age.

This stranger presently strode to a cleared spot in the center of the floor, where he waited as if to attract attention. In this maneuver he was not disappointed, for the room quickly became silent, and all eyes turned expectantly toward him.

"Gentlemen," he began, "with your kind permission I will endeavor to entertain you for a brief period with a few feats of prestidigitation."

"Presti—presti—" hiccuped a half-intoxicated puncher at the bar. "Thassa hot one. Wha's he plannin' to do?"

"Shut up," a neighbor commanded him. "We'll find out soon enough."

The blond-haired stranger deftly rolled up his sleeves.

"Just to show you that I have nothing to conceal," he explained.

From the pool table near by he took a red ball, carelessly rolling it in his long, slim fingers.

"Watch!" he cried, tossing the ball into the air. But when he caught it the single ball had magically increased to two.

"The hand is quicker than the eye," he said, modestly acknowledging the flutter of applause which greeted his effort. The two balls clicked together as he tossed them aloft. Plainly he caught the two, but one had vanished.

A stir by the door drew Larry's attention from the show. His heavy-set, brutal-faced friend of the afternoon had entered.

The entertainment went on, to the vast approval of the spectators, who called for more whenever the performer appeared about to stop.

Suddenly a harsh voice crashed through the room, sounding from an open window fronting the bar.

"Grab a star, everybody!"

Involuntarily all turned, to face a masked bandit, whose two cocked guns menaced each person in the room. Arms went up like pump handles.

"That's right," the gunman approved. "Now keep 'em there. One false move and I'll be pouring lead through you birds like water through a sieve. All jake, Bill!" he called to an unseen accomplice behind him. "I got these birds coppered. Do your stuff."

A second masked man entered by way of the door, promptly proceeding to go through the crowd. Gold and silver coins disappeared into a canvas bag, together with an occasional article of jewelry. Some men the outlaw overlooked; others he searched in no more than a half-hearted fashion.

Now and then he was more particular, and unaccountably so, for it was not always the most prosperous looking persons who received the more definite attention. The whole thing was a puzzle to the watchful Larry Wilson.

The latter's eyes wandered over the entertainer, whose show had been thus rudely interrupted. The slim, blond-haired chap was badly frightened, his eyes fixed in wide open respect on the two big revolvers so deftly manipulated by the outlaw at the window.

"That lad's sure picked up something he never wished for," Larry mused with a sympathetic chuckle. "I bet he's sorry he ever brought his little show into the cow country."

Larry had little to lose personally, having left the bulk of his cash in the safe at the hotel where he expected to put up for the night. Next to him stood a man dressed in the black, more formal type of frontier clothing, a man whom Larry, for no particular reason, found himself cordially disliking.

It was now this person's turn to contribute, a thing it was plain that he did not at all relish. A few loose coins jingled into the canvas sack, and then the outlaw's exploring fingers dived into a coat pocket, bringing forth a small tobacco pouch.

"I'm short of makin's," he muttered. "Guess I'll take this," and the tobacco sack went to join the other plunder.

He next passed on to Larry, taking from him two large gold pieces and some silver. Several other men were hurriedly frisked, including the big bully whom Larry had encountered that afternoon.

"That 'll do, Bill," called the watchman. "Let's shift along. Get going, and I'll join you later." He did not relax his attention for a second until a minute or two after his companion had left the saloon. Then, with a mocking, "Much obliged, gents!" the window was empty.

Half a dozen guns flashed into action, but the shots were without effect. A few angry individuals boiled out in vain pursuit, but darkness had swallowed the outlaws. Presently things quieted down again.

"Who's the big cuss over by the roulette wheel?" Larry inquired of the bar-keep in a low tone.

"Him?" after a careless squint through the smoke-laden air. "That's Nate Clevenger. Foreman over to old Jud Strachan's cow farm."

"Friend of yours?" Larry asked casually, finishing his liquor.

The attendant shot Wilson a swift glance as if to read what lay behind the question.

"If you're figuring on taking that baby apart to see what makes him tick," he said, "don't stop on my account, stranger. He's a good cowman; I'll say that for him, and that's as far as I'll go. If he's got other good points, I ain't acquainted with 'em. He'll bear watching. Clevenger's got the reputation of being quite a gun slinger; he's killed three men that I know of the past four years, but, just the same, down below the surface he's a big bluff—yellow as the Missouri in flood time."

The subject of this discussion abruptly strode over to the blond-haired entertainer, grabbing the latter by the shoulder and spinning him around until the two were face to face.

"That was smooth stuff, but it didn't fool me," Clevenger said savagely. "I was hooked fifty dollars by your pals. Suppose you make it good."

"Wh-what do you mean?" was the other's startled exclamation.

"You're wise to what I mean. That fool show of yours wasn't nothing but a stall."

"But good gosh!" with a rather sickly smile. "Didn't you see that holdup man go through my clothes? I'm clean. My idea was to pass a hat around after the show, and get me a stake."

"Of course he'd go through you with the rest of us. All a part of the play. If you ain't got fifty dollars I'll have to take it out of your hide."

Larry was watching this with keen interest, conscious of a feeling of sympathy toward Clevenger's victim. There had been an infectious spirit of good fellowship about the young chap during his entertainment that met instant response from Larry Wilson. Unnoticed by either of the principals in the little drama, he left his position by the bar.

"You ain't worth much," Clevenger was growling, "so it'll be hard pickings to get fifty out of your hide, but I'm going to try like hell to get the value."

His huge arm swung back—and at that instant Larry thrust himself between the two.

"I'd sure hate to see you cheated, big boy," the intruder remarked pleasantly. "Also I hate to see a chap with two guns on his flanks tackle an unarmed man. And since you want a run for your money, take it out of me. I'll guarantee results."

During a split second the arm remained poised in the air, while that same look of astonishment and chagrin which had marked their encounter of the afternoon spread over Nate Clevenger's face. He hesitated, his arm falling to his side, but he made no move to connect with the pistol butt a few inches away from his fingers.

"Well?" Larry's cold glance dwelt on him derisively, while beads of sweat burst out on Clevenger's brow. He hated to back down, but was afraid to do otherwise.

With a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders, Larry turned toward the chap whom he had saved from a manhandling.

"Mr. Clevenger wishes to apologize for his rudeness," said he cheerfully. "And now let's irrigate. I got the price of two drinks that was overlooked in the stick-up." And passing his arm within the other's, he led him toward the bar.

"That was mighty good of you," Larry's new friend murmured, as they lined up before the drink mixer. "I appreciate it a lot."

"Don't mention it," Larry disclaimed politely. "Here's mud in your eye!" and he hoisted his glass.

"Over the river!" was the friendly retort as the other glass went up.

Larry sent a silver dollar spinning across the bar, but the attendant sent it back.

"Those drinks are on me," said he. "It's worth more than two shots of rye to see some one hang the Indian sign on Nate Clevenger."

"Beats hell the way things break sometimes," Larry mused. "I'd heard of Jud Strachan, and was planning to strike his outfit for a job, but now I don't guess the foreman will take me on. Not quite!"

"I've spoiled your chances for a job!" the stranger said regretfully.

"My chances was plumb shot full of holes before I ever saw you. Mr. Clevenger and I met this afternoon down on the South Fork trail, only then I didn't know who he was. We had words."

"Oh," the bartender grunted comprehendingly. He glanced Larry over with added respect. "So you're that lad, eh? I heard about it. Hank Riley was telling me. Said you put up the snappiest exhibition of gun pulling he ever see."

"The hand is quicker than the eye," chuckled the blond-haired fellow. He hesitated for an instant. Then, impulsively: "My name's Bates—Ed Bates."

"Mine's Wilson. Larry's the first part." The two shook hands.

A man burst excitedly into the room at this moment.

"The sheriff's run across those stick-up artists," he called out. "They got away, but he saved the boodle."

Sheriff Bill Pease presently appeared, carrying the sack which all recognized as the one into which their valuables had recently vanished.

"Step up, gents," Pease invited. "We'll shuffle this plunder back where it belongs."

He dumped the stuff out on a pool table, while various individuals crowded around. Larry, whose financial loss was not enough to cause him undue worry, remained for a moment with Bates near the bar.

"Who's the chap in the black suit?" he inquired of the drink shooter, indicating the man who had contributed the small tobacco pouch, and whose eagerness to see what came from the bandits' sack seemed wholly out of proportion to the trifling value of what he had lost.

"That's Tim Woodford. Claims he's a lawyer. Mebbe he is. I ain't saying."

"Acts like he'd lost a young fortune," Larry observed.

"He would. When it comes to cash money, Tim's tighter 'n a fat girl's patent leather party slippers."

After a time Larry recovered the twenty dollars in gold which the outlaw had taken from him. Incidentally he noticed that Mr. Woodford failed to regain the tobacco pouch, and that he appeared considerably downcast over this failure, although making no public comments regarding it. Apparently Larry had been the only one to note that little detail of the holdup.

"There's something funny about this," he told himself. "I'd sure like to know what's stirring back of it all."

III

THE first hours that followed the destruction of her flock found Virginia Stirling a prey to alternating indignation and despair. Buck Strachan had seemed particularly put out because the cattlemen had acted contrary to their understanding with him at the time of the meeting. To Virginia that detail made little difference; three hundred odd head of sheep had been destroyed—and the value to her represented the margin between making money and losing it.

Resolutely, Virginia compelled herself to face the facts. She was far too proud and independent to give in willingly, yet discretion required her to keep what remained of her flocks to the land included in the Bar Y Bar territory. It had been a season of abundant rainfall, which had produced an unusually fine crop of grass.

This year she could get along, but another year would surely bring different conditions, with the natural grass supply of her own ranch falling short of requirements. The issue had to be met—then or now.

What was she to do? Buck had already advised her. There was only one other person to whom she might appeal in this crisis—her uncle.

"I know what Uncle Tim will say," Virginia thought. "He'll tell me to graze my sheep at home, for the present, anyway. I don't know—I believe I'll ride into town and ask him."

Mr. Timothy Woodford sat in his office gazing out through a none too clean window when Virginia arrived.

"Well, well!" he cried. "You're a sight for sore eyes, my dear girl. What good luck brings you this way?"

"I'm in a jam, Uncle Tim," Virginia said slowly.

Woodford did not appear especially surprised at the news.

"I heard that the cattle interests are planning to start something," he admitted.

"They've already started. Three hundred of my sheep lie dead, driven over a cliff. It's an outrage!" Virginia's bosom rose and fell tempestuously under the sharp spur of her indignation. She shuddered, shutting her eyes, as if she could see the woolly bodies hurtling through space to the jagged rocks below.

"Do you know whose riders did it?" Woodford asked, after his niece had somewhat recovered her composure.

"No. Juan, my herder, hadn't the slightest idea. I questioned him closely, but you know how it is with Mexicans. The raiders shot at him, and the poor fellow was frantic with terror. He doesn't even know how many riders were involved, though there were probably only two or three. The men were disguised by bandannas over the lower portion of their faces."

"If we had anything to go by I wouldn't hesitate to bring suit against their employer," Woodford said thoughtfully. "Yet that could probably accomplish little, for sentiment is almost solid against the sheep growers. What are your plans?"

"I hardly know," she said, hesitating. "I've about made up my mind, but I want your advice. Buck Strachan was talking to me this morning, urging me to keep my flocks off the open range. It was while he was there that Juan came to tell me of the raid. The cattlemen had a meeting yesterday, it seems, and Buck was to pass their ultimatum on to me. I was granted several days in which to consider, and during that time no active steps were to be taken against me. Events have proved the insincerity of some among them, at least."

"I'm surprised that Strachan and Linsley didn't stick to their word," Woodford remarked.

"Oh, it was no doubt some irresponsible cowboys," Virginia said. "Who actually was guilty makes little difference. Of course this year there is grass enough on the Bar Y Bar to supply what I need. But—Tell me, Uncle Tim, what would you do in my place?"

"I'd fight them, Virginia!" he replied violently. "Don't let those ruffians ride you off the range. You have your rights!"

"That's just what I want to do," cried the girl with flashing eyes. "But how can I? One woman against such odds?"

"Arm your herders. Tell 'em to shoot

if anybody interferes with them or the sheep."

Virginia smiled at him—a bit wanly.

"Can you imagine those gentle young Mexicans of mine standing up before the hard-riding, fast-shooting cowboys of this section?"

"Fire 'em. Get some real red-blooded chaps in their places that aren't afraid of gunpowder."

"If I only could!" Virginia sighed. "That's impossible, I'm afraid." Then she drew a deep breath. "I'm going to try, anyway."

"Good girl!" Woodford approved, smiling inscrutably. "That's the way I like to hear a person talk!"

A few minutes later Virginia left her uncle's office, riding back toward her home ranch, vastly encouraged. But with the passing miles came tardy doubts.

It was one thing to take a stand against the tremendous power of the cattle interests. Winning alone and unaided against their strength was quite another matter.

And as far as actual help was concerned, Virginia had received nothing from her uncle. Nothing, that is, but advice—the wisdom of which was questionable.

She found a visitor waiting for her at the Bar Y Bar, a man whose only sign of age was the whiteness of his hair. She had never met this man before, but recognized him as John Lindsley, second in importance among the cattlemen only to Jud Strachan.

"How do you do, Miss Stirling?" was his formal salutation.

Virginia nodded coldly, feeling that there was no reason why she should unbend to one of her enemies.

"I learned from Buck Strachan what happened this morning," Lindsley went on. "Buck was pretty wild, and I'm not blaming him—after I promised your sheep wouldn't be molested for the present. I wanted to tell you that the raid was not by my orders, nor by order of any one of my associates. We're very sorry."

"Indeed!" said Virginia icily. "Why should you be sorry? It merely means fewer sheep for your riders to murder in the future, does it not?"

"That's a hard way to put it, seems to me," Lindsley protested.

"Of course you can't see the matter through my eyes. You are a little bothered because some overzealous cowboys acted too soon. I fail to see that the wrong to-

ward me is any greater because the outrage was committed to-day instead of, say, day after to-morrow—or even next week. And now, if you will please excuse me—"

"One moment, Miss Stirling. You have said that I can't see the thing through your eyes. Have you tried to look at it through ours?"

"I discussed it at length with Buck Strachan," Virginia said wearily. "Is it necessary for us to go over the ground again?"

"No, I reckon not," Lindsley admitted regretfully. "If Buck couldn't convince you, there's likely no use of my trying."

The following morning Virginia determined to lose no time in open defiance of the ultimatum. She had four Mexican herders in her employ, faithful, loyal boys, and she gave instructions that they were to graze some two hundred head on a strip of open range which extended parallel to her western boundary. It was a section of gently rolling land, not cut by any deep cañons which could give the enemy a chance such as had been seized at the rim of Arroyo Seco. To her surprise the herders demurred.

"What!" she demanded. "You refuse to go!"

"But, *señorita*, thee cowboys!" one apologized. "To herd thee sheep, eet ees death. We are not thee—what you call gun slingers, *señorita*."

"No," Virginia sighed, "I can see you're not. It isn't fair to expect that of you. I shouldn't have asked you to go."

"Then thee sheep—we graze them at home, *señorita*?" was the hopeful question.

"Some can stay at home. I'll leave them in your charge. The others I'll take out myself."

A stir of protest arose. Under no circumstances must the *señorita* take sheep out into the forbidden country. Rather than that, would the herders go. They crowded around Virginia excitedly, proclaiming their willingness. The girl, however, remained firm, although she smiled a gracious acknowledgment of their loyalty. Still protesting, the Mexicans yielded to her orders.

While Virginia Stirling professed no great skill in the art of herding sheep, she found it after all to be easy enough. Two intelligent collies really did most of the work.

At first the girl was uneasy, even while

hardly over the Bar Y Bar boundary, half expecting a gang of whooping cow-punchers to appear around the edge of the nearest hill at any moment. But all seemed quiet and peaceful, few sounds to be heard save the bleats of the grazing animals, and no enemy appeared on the scene worse than a skulking coyote, hovering at a safe distance in the vain hope of being able to pick up a tender lamb.

At noon Virginia shared her lunch with the two friendly dogs, and, after eating, lay on the grass, idly drinking in the beauty of her surroundings. Due to recent rains, the rolling plain was everywhere dotted with a myriad of blossoms, that had sprung up like magic from the semiarid soil. High overhead a few big white cumulus clouds floated lazily; a pair of mated plover sped past, uttering their plaintive shrill cries. Prairie dogs yapped industriously from their near-by town. The monotonous bleating of the sheep formed a low, agreeable accompaniment to the other sounds which reached her ears.

Lying back on the fragrant grass, Virginia closed her eyes. Without the least intention of doing so, she fell asleep.

Some time later she abruptly roused, staring about her in bewilderment, at first hardly realizing where she was. Reassurance came as the mists of sleep were gradually dispelled from her brain. Her horse was quietly grazing, fifty yards away.

The sheep had wandered on a little distance; she could hear their bleating beyond a low hill. But there was something strange about the sound. Suddenly the dogs burst into excited barking, and it came to Virginia that it was this barking which had awakened her.

She caught her horse and mounted, half in a panic, heart beating furiously in dreadful anticipation of what might be going on over beyond the ridge lying between her and the sheep. She sent the pony up the slope at a mad gallop.

From the summit of the low elevation a sufficiently alarming scene was spread before her. Two mounted men were engaged in a systematic effort to break up the flock, riding ruthlessly back and forth through the frightened animals, which, driven by the blind panic of utter terror, were scattering in all directions. The faithful dogs, helpless to cope with this situation, nevertheless barked their defiance.

For an instant Virginia took in this view

from the hilltop, where she had checked her horse. Then, rashly yielding to sudden impulse, she went crashing down the gentle slope, fiercely determined to stop the outrage, but hardly knowing how she was going to stop it.

As she neared the scene she perceived that the two riders were partly disguised by red handkerchiefs; evidently they were the same who had raided the flock in charge of her herder the previous day. Still, no thought of personal danger came to her mind.

The cattlemen, bitter though they were against sheep and their owners, would not carry their war to such limits, so Virginia reasoned. The two riders saw her coming, and for the moment abandoned their task to await the girl's approach.

"Let my sheep alone!" she cried, her voice breaking in the choking anger which mastered her. "Get away! Do you hear?"

To lend force to her commands, Virginia drew the revolver she carried, furious at herself because her hand trembled so.

One of the men viciously sunk spurs into his horse's flanks, and the frantic animal lunged madly forward, coming up against Virginia's mount with a crash that nearly threw her from the saddle. Her right wrist was seized in a viselike grip, and twisted until she bit her lips to hold back a scream of agony. The little gun dropped to the ground.

Too late, Virginia awoke to the fact that these men were not ordinary cowboys, who, with all their faults, were never lacking in respect for womanhood. Rather were they desperadoes, criminals of low type, perhaps imported to do the dirty work.

Wild with terror, the girl struggled, although knowing that her struggles must be useless. Her two arms were forced behind her back; she felt a rope being passed around them.

In a daze, half fainting, she was conscious of a sudden whiff of air past her face; the unmistakable, sickening thud of a bullet against flesh; the crack of a weapon from somewhere to the rear.

At once she found herself free, as the man who had been holding her slumped limply to the ground. His companion uttered a startled exclamation, and without any unnecessary delay went dashing off, crouched low on his horse, the better to escape the untimely fate of the first.

In the reaction of relief at this unhelped for rescue, Virginia found her body strangely weak. She slipped down from her horse, gripping the saddle horn to give support to her rebellious, tottering legs. A cowboy came riding down the slope, a gun in his hand, and deep concern displayed on his pleasant face.

"You all right, ma'am?" he cried anxiously. "You'll have to excuse me for shooting close like that, but I was afraid that low-down skunk might hurt you."

Virginia shuddered at sight of the desperado inert on the ground, but managed a smile at the cowboy's words, whereat he smiled in his turn. She liked his smile; it brought out a network of tiny crinkles about the corners of his mouth and eyes.

"I'm really all right," she assured him nervously.

"Now I'm mighty glad to hear that," he declared, swinging gracefully from his horse, hat in hand, and standing between her and the dead man. "What was the trouble, ma'am, if you don't mind my asking? You see, I figured this was a time when I'd better shoot first and ask questions afterward."

Briefly, Virginia told him.

"I suppose it was foolish of me to interfere," she concluded, "but I was so angry I lost what little common sense I have."

"Yes, ma'am," he nodded gravely, "I'd say it was right foolish of you to step in when rirraff like that is running wild. That ain't any place for a girl, seems to me. But if you'll excuse my saying so, ma'am, handling sheep ain't properly a girl's job—not right now, and around here. That is, from what folks have been telling me. You see, I'm a stranger in these parts."

Obeying a sudden impulse, Virginia told him further of her troubles; of the raid on her flock the day before, and of the herders' unwillingness to take sheep into the open range.

"What you're needing, ma'am," the cowboy said, "is some one to run things for you. What I mean is, somebody that's got enough red blood in his veins to resent being ridden like a broken cayuse."

"That's exactly what my uncle told me yesterday."

"And who is your uncle, ma'am? Might be I know him."

"Timothy Woodford. He lives in Black Butte."

The cow-puncher paused to search himself for the makings of a cigarette.

"I ain't acquainted with Mr. Woodford personal, though I've heard of him. It was good advice, I should say. I'm applying for that job."

Virginia started in surprise, staring at this wandering knight as if her ears had not heard correctly. He was so obviously a cowboy.

"Perhaps you don't fully understand the situation," she said. "I have no steers. I'm one of those despised creatures—a sheep grower. I have been definitely warned from the open range, and this is the second time my property has been molested in two days."

The rider smiled deprecatingly.

"Yes, ma'am," said he. "I got you the very first time. I ain't so blind but what I can see through a knot hole, when the knot's been busted out. I came in here hoping for a job. A chap can't live without working, you know."

"But why hire out to herd sheep? I always thought that was the last thing a cowboy would do."

The puncher's lips parted in a broad grin as he swiftly rolled a cigarette. For a moment he was quiet, smoking in silent enjoyment of the tobacco.

"It's this way, ma'am," he presently went on in a casual tone. "You sure never can tell what a rider's going to do next. Take me, for instance. I never did herd sheep, but yesterday, as I was a riding along the South Fork trail, a big loud-mouth stops me and says that I'm a no-account sheep wrangler, and that I can't come into this country at all. Not none whatever! So we argued it out, him and me, and after he's had a change of heart, sort of, he decides to let me stay. But since that *hombre* tagged me as a sheep herder, seems like I might as well go ahead and be one. Whole hawg or die's my motto."

He smiled at her in quizzical good nature, and added:

"I'll try to give satisfaction if you take me on, ma'am."

"Of course I'll give you a job," Virginia cried warmly. "Probably you're doing all this out of pity for me, and while I don't want pity, I do need a real man on my side. Anyway, I'm very grateful. What is your name, please?"

"Larry Wilson, ma'am. And yours?"

"I am Virginia Stirling. Now what had

we better do about this—" Her eyes indicated the body of the outlaw, where it had fallen before Larry's bullet.

He silently stooped to remove the red bandanna which concealed the dead man's features, replacing it after a brief scrutiny.

"I wanted an idea what he looks like," was his apologetic explanation. "We'll leave him right here, ma'am. If his pardner wants, he can come and get the body. I really ought to have shot him, too, but I'm thinking a bullet's too easy a death for any fellow that bothers a woman on the range. In the country I come from we'd stake a man out on a big ant hill for trying that stunt."

Virginia shuddered again, turning her eyes from the gruesome sight of the dead body—and her mind from the still more gruesome thoughts brought up by the cowboy's sinister remark.

"Do as you think best about it," she told him. "And now we ought to get the sheep together and start them home. We can't hurry the animals, and it will take time."

IV

THE days which followed Larry Wilson's arrival at the Bar Y Bar brought a wonderful release from the load of worry that had oppressed Virginia Stirling. It seemed so good to have a man on whom to rely—one whose capable shoulders were eager to accept the burden which was proving too heavy for her. She found herself liking him more and more.

The Mexican herders reacted in a wholesome way to his presence, sensing in him a redoubtable ally and protector. With the cowboy on guard, they were willing to take the sheep anywhere.

Larry never in any way presumed to take advantage of the rather unique place he occupied on the ranch; never attempted to thrust his society on Virginia, always treating her with the respect and consideration due to an employer. Virginia, indeed, sometimes wished that this volunteer protector of hers were a little less formal in their daily contact. For the girl confessed herself deeply interested in Larry Wilson; more than interested, perhaps. Intrigued might have been the better word.

Half unconsciously she began comparing him with Buck Strachan, the only other cow-puncher she had had an opportunity to know at all well. And it was not Larry

who suffered by this comparison. Buck professed to be in love with her; had begged her over and over again to marry him. But it was a total stranger who came to her assistance in the time of need.

Virginia was possibly a bit unjust toward Buck in this matter. She had not seen him since that memorable morning of the first raid on her sheep, and was possessed of a lively curiosity regarding what he would say and do when he learned of Larry Wilson's presence at the Bar Y Bar.

When Buck finally came to the ranch, Larry chanced to be away, and Virginia could not decide whether she was glad or sorry. She wanted the two to meet—and yet dreaded their meeting.

"What's this I hear, Virginia?" Buck demanded. "Who's this gay buckaroo you got working on the place?"

She froze into instant resentment at his tone.

"I don't see that it's any of your business. Furthermore, I don't know just what you mean by a buckaroo, though it's probably something highly unpleasant. Larry Wilson's a cowboy like you—only with enough chivalry about him to come to the defense of a girl in trouble, even though she was nothing more than a wretched sheep herder."

"I've heard about that fellow from Nate," Buck went on hotly.

"And I suppose if Nate Clevenger doesn't approve of him the last word has been said. Poor Larry!"

"Oh, I'm not sticking up for Nate," Buck protested. "That isn't the point."

"You know why Nate doesn't like him, of course. Because Larry proved himself the better man when your father's foreman tried to bully him."

"And I bet Wilson's been tooting his horn over it big," Buck sneered.

"Larry Wilson doesn't need to toot his own horn, as you so elegantly express it," Virginia assured him in disdain.

"Dead stuck on him already, ain't you?" Buck snapped, his tongue getting out of control. However, the hot-tempered youth instantly regretted those rash words as he perceived the scorn registered on Virginia's face.

"Forgive me," he pleaded abjectly. "I didn't go for to say that, Virginia. It popped out on me unexpected."

"You'd better apologize," Virginia declared in cold dignity.

"I didn't come over this morning to fight with you," Buck went on, forcing himself to speak calmly. "I wanted to say that I've been combing the range to locate the fellows that ruined your flock that day. I can't find a thing about 'em. They've just naturally vamosed."

"Larry found them without much trouble," Virginia explained, and told of her first meeting with Wilson.

"Some guys have all the luck," Buck mourned. "Now, why wasn't it me that had that chance? I figure you've quite a lot of confidence in this Wilson party, after what he's done and all. But I want to tell you, Virginia, that some day you'll wake up and see who your real friends are. This Wilson may look big now, but wait. That's all I got to say."

"You're talking like a little, simple-minded child, Buck," Virginia said with a mirthless laugh. "I suppose you mean that eventually I'll find my true friends among the cattle barons who have ordered me off the range, killed my sheep by the hundreds, and, at least, indirectly, inspired a cowardly attack on me personally. Your reasoning powers are in a bad way, Buck."

"That's all right, you wait and see," he said darkly. Then he left in a temper.

Buck was jealous at Larry's presence on Virginia's ranch, and because of the disquieting fact that this interloper had definitely stolen away his own claim as the girl's protector. Nor did Buck feel any the happier when he reflected that his rival had come along in the nick of time with action, whereas he himself had done nothing but indulge in idle talk and boasts which he could not make good.

Nate Clevenger burned with even a fiercer wrath against the newcomer, although for very different reasons. Twice had Larry Wilson humiliated him, once before his two riders and once again publicly in the saloon. Clevenger thirsted for revenge, but that first meeting with Larry had imbued him with a wholesome respect for the other's skill with a six-gun.

For Nate Clevenger's peace of mind it was necessary that Larry be planted beneath the sod; preferably by himself, but Nate was willing to forego that satisfaction for the sake of avoiding the risk of facing his enemy's deadly gun. It was conceivable that some man might beat Larry Wilson in the draw, although the odds seemed against it. Nate was eager to have the ex-

periment tried—provided another than himself made the attempt. His mind was also toying with the notion of a long range execution by means of a rifle.

Nate's keen eyes were not blind to the jealousy in Buck Strachan's heart, but he made the mistake of exaggerating its violence. The thought occurred to him that here at hand might be a suitable instrument for the accomplishment of his purpose, and accordingly he did not delay in sounding Buck out.

"I judge you ain't very keen about this Wilson being over at the Bar Y Bar," he casually remarked one day.

Buck regarded him questioningly, saying nothing. Clevenger was a little disappointed; this was not quite the reception he had hoped for.

"Wilson's an ornery sort of cuss, from what I hear," Nate went on. "If I liked a girl I'm thinking I wouldn't want him hanging around her. No telling what might happen. Mark my word, he don't mean that girl of yours any good."

"Just what do you mean by that?" Buck demanded.

"Why, I been told that Wilson was in town t'other day, and a feller in a saloon remarked as how he ought to be pulling down pretty good pay, hiring out to herd sheep, now when things are a bit strained.

"Wilson allows with a wink that he ain't worrying none about pay; cash pay, that is. Allows that pretty boss of his ain't the kind to be stingy when it comes to the proper sort of reward."

For one startled second Nate Clevenger thought in a panic that he had overshot his mark, and regretted going quite so far. Buck's face flamed dangerously.

"Damn your hide, Nate Clevenger!" he exploded. "I've a mind to tear you into little bits for that nasty crack."

Clevenger had no wish to get into any sort of trouble with the militant son of his employer.

"Keep your shirt on, Buck," he advised the younger man. "I'm only telling you what I heard. Probably somebody ought to be tore to pieces, but it strikes me I ain't hardly the correct party. It's a hell of a note to take it out on me, when I'm merely passing you the information for your own good."

"Where did you get it?" Buck inquired in pointed directness.

"I ain't able to say exactly," Clevenger

replied guardedly. He had been working his imagination overtime, and realized the advantage of not being too definite in his answers to Buck. "It comes in a round-about way, but you can see that this here Wilson must have been shooting off his face careless like."

"That's a habit some folks got," Buck said dryly. "I've noticed it more'n once. Speaking casual, I'd say it was a plumb reckless habit to indulge in, and right now I'd sure be pleased to get a statement from you that, whether this Wilson party passed that remark or not, you're absolutely sure Miss Stirling never said or done anything to justify it. I'm waiting to hear from you."

"Why, that ain't hardly necessary, Buck," Clevenger rejoined with appealing frankness. "Anybody that knows Miss Stirling knows she ain't that kind. You're talking foolishness with your mouth."

"And you ain't aiming to carry this dirty gossip any further, are you?" Buck pursued.

"It ain't likely," Clevenger grunted, some of his frankness gone.

"I'm a heap gratified to hear you say that," Buck informed him. "Because it occurs to me that if you did forget yourself and peddle it here and there, sort of, one of us is likely to turn up missing at grub pile." Nate Clevenger squirmed uneasily as Buck scornfully surveyed him. "Why don't you do your own killing, Nate?" the young fellow added in startling suddenness and meaning.

"What's back of that?" Clevenger blustered, to cover his discomfiture.

"You know damned well what's back of it," Buck assured him coldly, "or else you're a bigger fool than I give you credit for. Wilson's got you buffaloed. Twice he's called your bluff, and you never even had the guts to lay your hand on the table; you just faded out of the picture. I ain't claiming that bird as a bosom friend, but if I ever do roll a gun on him it won't be because I'm honing to rake your burned chestnuts out of the fire. I got some other thoughts on this matter, too. You interested to hear 'em, while we're discussing?"

Nate grumbled something that might be taken as an assent.

"I don't think Wilson ever said anything like you claim he did."

"You mean I'm lying?" Clevenger demanded thickly.

"I mean *somebody's* lying," Buck coolly corrected him. "You can take it or leave it lay."

For a second or two Clevenger hesitated, while young Strachan waited in supreme indifference. Then the former seemingly concluded to decline the challenge.

"The damned jassack!" he mused vindictively, as Buck presently left him. "I never suspected he'd take it that way. I been thinking for some time now that he wasn't exactly in love with me, and it sure looks like the truth. Hope he doesn't spill an earful to the old man. I might be out of a job, which would be one hell of a note. I'd give a stack of blue chips to find out just how much that Buck knows—or thinks he knows."

Under cover of his position on the Strachan ranch, Nate had found opportunity to dip into a shady side line, which was proving decidedly worth while financially. He thought he had covered his tracks well, but now an unpleasant suspicion stirred in his brain. Knowing that Buck resented Wilson's presence at the Bar Y Bar, he had hoped to fan the flames of jealous anger to white heat by the unfounded report of the suggestive words put into Larry's mouth. But the plan had snapped back on its originator in a most disconcerting fashion.

"Looks like I can't depend on Buck," Nate mused regretfully. "Guess I'll have to do the job myself, some way. It ought not to be hard to get rid of Wilson without running into too much trouble."

In the meantime two conferences were going on in the town of Black Butte, both of them quite vitally concerned with certain persons and events of the locality. One of these was in the office of Mr. Timothy Woodford, presided over by Mr. Woodford in person.

The second conference was in a locked room of the hotel, and in charge of the deliberations was the blond-haired prestidigitator who had introduced himself to Larry Wilson as Ed Bates. Two men were with him, men whose appearance and general build suggested the masked bandits who had held up the crowd at the Cowboy's Home, on that first night of Larry Wilson's arrival in Black Butte.

"We've got the goods on the Chink," one of these last was saying. "Why not give him a ride and see what breaks. Something might come out of it."

Ed Bates shook his head decisively.

"Nothing doing, Jimmy," was his verdict. "Not yet. We've got to dig deeper than we've gone so far. I want this job done right while we're about it. We'll sit tight a few days longer."

V

NATE CLEVINGER stood by a solitary cottonwood that reared itself aloft some two hundred feet from the Strachan bunkhouse, and stared fixedly off through the darkness of early evening. From his attitude one might have suspected that the foreman anticipated seeing something.

For five minutes, ten minutes, Clevenger kept his eyes focused on some distant, invisible point, his expectations unrewarded.

"Damn that fellow!" he mused. "If he's going to be on hand, why don't he show speed. Must think I got nothing to do but stick around and gaze at the stars."

Just then a faint dot of light gleamed momentarily, much like a star close to the horizon.

"That's him!" Nate exclaimed mentally, and quietly betook himself to the stables, where his horse was ready against possible need. The act of saddling required only a short time.

A half hour of steady riding brought him to a lava knob, which in daylight would have been seen to be noticeably higher than any of the surrounding elevations. The place was a lonely, deserted section, not far from the boundary of the Bar Y Bar ranch; Clevenger was rather under the impression that it lay on Virginia Stirling's land, although he did not know for certain, and cared less. A man was waiting for him in the shelter of the hill.

"What's been keeping you?" the latter growled impatiently, as Clevenger approached. "Figure I'm going to hang around here all night, listening to the coyotes howl?"

"Save it, Dan, save it!" Clevenger told him gruffly. "I started as soon as I got your signal. That cayuse of mine ain't sprouted wings yet. Got the stuff?"

"Sure I got it. What would I be here for if I wasn't primed? You must think I'm stuck on this rotten trip. You sure picked the soft end of the assignment, believe me!"

"You don't need to kick. Who started the business, anyway? If it wasn't for me you'd still be punching cows at forty a

month and found. Well, let's have the package, and I'll be moving. Got to cover some few miles to-night."

"The tariff's gone up since last time."

"What's that?" Clevenger snapped.

"You heard me. The price has jumped down in Old Mexico. I had to meet the raise, and so I'm passing it on to you. The ante 'll be just two hundred smackers more."

"That's robbery!" Clevenger gritted.

"I wouldn't say so. If you don't like it you can drop out. I'll hunt me another customer and take in your profits. I'm not getting enough of the gravy as it is. You seem to think they's no risk about my end of the game, and I'm here to state that you can take one more big think, Mister Man. They're getting fussy along the border, and it ain't so easy to slip by as it used to be. I near got hopped this trip."

"Anyway, you don't need to stand the boost yourself. Pass it along to the next customer. No reason why the cost of overhead shouldn't be split. Pull a little high finance, and let the ultimate consumer be the goat—just the way they do in other places."

"I might stand a reasonable boost," Clevenger growled, "but I hate like hell to be stuck this way. I've a mind to call your bluff."

"Fair enough, since you feel that way about it. Such being the case, I'll ride. *Adios, hombre!*" and the speaker turned toward his horse, anchored by the dropped bridle reins.

Not until he was in the saddle and actually riding away did Nate capitulate. As in poker, the best bluffer won.

"Don't tear your shirt, Dan. I'll stand the new figure."

"You're talking sense, now. Probably I'm doing you a good turn at that. Stick the next man four hundred."

"So that's the way you worked me, eh? You pay mebbly a hundred more, and pass it along doubled. Fine way to double cross a pardner!"

The other's grin, indistinct in the darkness, showed him abashed not at all by Clevenger's accusation.

"Business, ain't it?" he chuckled. "Guess I'm entitled to a little on the side, seeing's I do most of the hard work and run most of the risk."

"Huh! You talk as if I wasn't running any risk."

"Be that as it may, here's the plunder. Now let's see the color of your jack."

Clevenger, grumbling in vain protest, brought forth from his saddle a buckskin bag heavy with gold pieces. Slowly he counted out the double eagles, the other man following the process with watchful eye. In return for the gold he turned over to Clevenger a small oblong package, carefully wrapped with stout twine.

"All right, is it?" Clevenger asked, testing the weight of the package with his hand.

"Guaranteed as to quality and amount. I never slipped any bum goods over on you yet, did I?"

"They's always a first time. But I reckon it's O. K. You'd lose as much as me if this fat graft comes to an end. That's what I'm counting on to keep you straight."

"Tut, tut, Nate! Don't you trust me?" There was a delicate shade of mockery in his tone.

"No farther than I can see you, Dan. You ain't been nicknamed Greasy Dan for nothing."

Greasy Dan shook his head mournfully, as if pained at thus failing to receive a vote of confidence.

"I'm disappointed in you, Nate," said he. "Of course, I don't trust you at all. It ain't likely anybody would, leastways if he knew you as well as I do. But, just the same, I was kind of hoping you felt different where I was involved. Ain't you got any regard for my feelings, Nate?"

Clevenger grunted disrespectfully by way of answer, whereat his companion laughed. With no further words, the two separated, each going his own way. Nate did not return to the Strachan ranch.

Lee Wung, proprietor of Black Butte's sole laundry, padded noiselessly about in thick-soled slippers of felt. As his hot iron smoothed the wrinkles from a damp flannel shirt, Lee Wung crooned softly to himself—a monotonous, tuneless chant. The shirt neatly ironed, Lee Wung paused to inspect a pot of bubbling rice on a stove at one side of the small, steam-filled room. It was now some time past the conventional supper hour, but Lee ate when he was hungry, without regard to the clock.

A bell tinkled musically, indicating that a customer had entered the front room of the establishment, and Lee Wung's response

was peculiar, not to say suspicious. Moving with an extreme of caution, the Chinese slipped up to a peephole, made by punching out a small knot, conveniently located.

With one of his black, almond-shaped eyes plastered to this hole, Lee Wung for the space of a few seconds thoughtfully surveyed his visitor. Although it was quite dark outside, the front portion of the laundry was sufficiently illuminated by the flickering glare of an oil lamp.

After his brief investigation, Lee Wung opened the door of the partition separating the two rooms, and casually made a shuffling entrance.

"Got my shirts ready?" the caller asked, extending a slip of coarse brown paper, with its scrawled hieroglyphics.

Lee Wung consulted it; then referred to the shelf where reposed sundry packages of laundry awaiting their owners. His chant was again in evidence, although almost inaudible, as he pattered among the paper bundles, while the eyes of the stranger bored into his unconscious back.

After a fruitless search, Lee Wung turned again to his customer.

"Not leddy," was his brief comment. "Thlursday."

"What's the matter with you, anyway?" Lee Wung's customer was obviously put out over this disappointment. "You said you'd have 'em for me to-night."

Lee shrugged his shoulders, superbly disclaiming responsibility.

"No have glot," said he, and there was an unmistakable finality about the words. The world might end in a blaze of glory; all sorts of miracles might happen; but one grim fact remained, as inevitable as the passing of time itself: those shirts would not be ready before Thursday.

The stranger hesitated, glancing meaningfully at the closed door which shut off view of the rear room. One might have thought he meditated an investigation, by force or otherwise.

"What you do with all your time?" he grumbled. "They ain't enough laundry in this whole town to keep you busy. Ought to have stuff on tap when you agree to."

"Solly," Lee Wung murmured apologetically, his beady eyes never leaving the visitor. "You clome black Thlursday, mlebbby?"

"Sure I'll be back, and you better have them shirtees waiting in a little paper bundle. I'm fond of Chinks. I like 'em raw,

savvy? And you'd just about make two good bites for me." A ferocious scowl added emphasis to the customer's words.

"Allee light," the unmoved Lee Wung responded, accepting that dire canabalistic prediction with true Oriental stoicism. Lee Wung was bound to the wheel of life; as it turned, so must his fate be decided. Should the gods who controlled its ruthless grinding decree that he be eaten raw to satisfy an unfulfilled laundry claim, it did not behoove him—a mere mortal—to cavil at their rulings.

With another vicious scowl, designed to impress on the laundryman the importance of living up to his business agreements, the stranger departed. Lee Wung watched him go, that same fathomless expression on his sallow face.

"The rash desires of an impatient man are darts of bitterness piercing his own soul," murmured Lee Wung philosophically. At least such might be a free translation of his remarks, softly intoned in the characteristic singsong of Chinese dialect.

Nate Clevenger had been pushing his horse mercilessly, riding toward Black Butte. Nate was not in good humor, for the longer he reflected on the neat way in which his partner, Greasy Dan, had so profitably milked him, the less rosy appeared life's horizon.

"Only one thing to do," he grumbled, savagely sinking spurs into the flanks of his pony. "Follow Dan's advice and hang the whole thing on that Chink—with interest."

Then there occurred to Mr. Clevenger the unhappy notion that he could easily have done this without the added expense of the costly lesson already taught him by Greasy Dan, had he but thought of it himself. Nate swore feelingly.

"It sure don't look like I'm cut out for a business man," he gloomily told himself. "Talk about opportunity knocking. I got to wait till it knocks so hard it slams me plumb into the middle of next week."

Arriving at Black Butte, Clevenger betook himself to a saloon, leaving his mount at the hitching rail. He was about to enter the resort, feeling the need of stimulants, but checked his step on the threshold. Public appearance at that time was not especially desirable.

Sighing regretfully, Nate abandoned his thoughts of alcoholic refreshment, and turned from the saloon to trace an incon-

spicuous course among the scattered buildings off the line of Black Butte's main street. In the darkness he failed to note a shadowy figure trailing him—a figure that had taken up the trail when Nate left the vicinity of the thirst emporium.

Accordingly Nate was considerably surprised when a hard, pointed something was abruptly jabbed against his back, to the accompaniment of the softly spoken words:

"Stick 'em up, *hombre!*"

Clevenger prided himself on being better than the ordinary man at the gentle art of gun slinging, but to pull a gun and start into action when an opponent already has his weapon against one's spinal column is equivalent to suicide. And Nate Clevenger was not ready for the last big adventure. His arms went up above his head in praiseworthy promptness.

The holdup artist's first move was doubtless a prudent one, dictated by the ethics of sound military strategy—the securing of Mr. Clevenger's side arms.

Next he proceeded to go through Clevenger's clothing with neatness and dispatch, depriving the victim of sundry valuables. Among other things he located the package which Greasy Dan not long before had surrendered in exchange for a goodly collection of the United States mint's product. This he examined curiously, still holding his captive under the potent threat of a cocked forty-five.

"What the hell!" the stranger exclaimed. At least he was a stranger to Clevenger; straining his eyes desperately in the gloom, the unhappy man could discern nothing at all familiar about his assailant's appearance.

"I'll give this a look-see when I got a better chance," he informed Nate. "Now march, *hombre*, and don't start any squawk until I'm out of shooting distance, or I'll feel compelled to pour enough lead into your system to sink a battleship." After this friendly bit of counsel the stranger left Nate to his own devices.

However, the robber's caution against squawking was wholly unnecessary, as the victim of this high-handed outrage had little desire to acquaint the authorities of Black Butte—in the person of Sheriff Bill Pease—as to the misfortune that had come his way. Better suffer the loss in silence than have it known that this parcel had been in his possession.

Fairly boiling with just indignation, con-

sumed by the stress of the fiery emotions which afflicted him, Nate Clevenger pursued his demoralized way, hardly knowing where he went. His whole cosmos was knocked out of whack.

Judge, then, of his feelings when less than three minutes after his harrowing experience with the freebooter, the same scene was reenacted. It was essentially the same, that is, with one vital exception. The first pirate made quite a respectable haul; the second found absolutely nothing worthy of his notice.

"There's no profit about this, I'm here to state," was his disgusted exclamation, when a hasty search of Mr. Clevenger's person resulted in a blank. "Looks to me like you're cleaner 'n a hound dawg's tooth."

"What you going to do about it?" Nate demanded sourly.

"Why, nothing, since you ask me," was the frank answer. "They ain't a whole lot I *can* do. But it don't seem noways right for a feller to have to circulate around as flat busted as you are. Guess the only thing I can do is stake you the price of a couple drinks. I got a heart, I have, even if I am in the Jesse James business. Here you are," and the charitably inclined Robin Hood tossed a silver dollar at his victim's feet, which act of generosity nevertheless left Nate Clevenger cold to any sentiment of gratitude.

"Drink heartily," was the robber's parting advice.

For a moment Nate remained standing there, as if anchored to the spot. Then he laughed, a jarring note. A blind man might have inferred from that laugh that all was not well with Mr. Clevenger.

"Twice in five minutes!" Nate complained bitterly to himself. "That's too often. It's getting to be a habit in this man's town, looks like. The next time any stick-up bird braces me I'm going to salivate him so sudden he'll think he's caught a streak of forked lightning by the tail."

Involuntarily Clevenger's hands dropped to where the butts of his two big revolvers should have been. He encountered merely empty space above the holsters, and thus was the fact driven in on him that his weapons had been confiscated.

Nate's mental processes were still somewhat dazed, but as he looked back over his recent unpleasant experiences his brain began to function more clearly.

"That first chap threw a good bluff," he reasoned, "but he knew all the time what I had on me, and that's what he was after. Likely the same with the second fellow. How'd they know?"

"Only one way possible—the yellow Chink! That slant-eyed old heathen's been double crossing me. Probably fixed things with these parties to stick me up, and they got their signals twisted. Or mebby the old salamander's been playing 'em off against each other, just to be sure himself. The middle against both ends this time, with the guy in the middle holding top cards."

Mr. Clevenger's jaws snapped grimly together.

"I'm going to interview that collection of moldy joss sticks," he told himself, in savage satisfaction. "When I get through with him he'll look like the wreck of a mispent life." And Nate Clevenger started on his way.

Lee Wung was plying chopsticks in a bowl of wholesome rice, when the tinkle of his bell announced another visitor. A glance through the peephole disclosed Nate Clevenger, and Lee Wung nonchalantly shuffled forth to meet him.

"See here," Nate growled, "you can't pull any funny stuff like you did on me and get away with it. Savvy? Come across with that package, or else slip me a thousand iron men to pay for it. Make it snappy, too. I'm in a hurry."

Lee Wung stared blandly at his caller and slowly shook his head.

"What's bliting you?" was his pithy inquiry. Lee Wung spoke better than he knew, for Nate Clevenger was indeed more or less blighted.

"Don't stall around," Nate frothed. "I want the pay for that package. You know what one. The package I was going to deliver you to-night; the package your stick-up guys got away from me."

A flicker of comprehension passed over Lee Wung's features.

"You no clutch um plackage?" he asked solicitously.

"Of course I didn't catch it!" Clevenger roared. "Didn't I just tell you how I was held up by those smooth guys of yours? I'm collecting my pay allee samee. Come across, you yellow heathen!"

"No can do," was Lee Wung's courteous response. "Solly."

"You'll be sorry before I get through

with you. I came after that money, and I'm going to get it."

"You bling um plackage to-morrow, mlebby?" Lee Wung suggested hopefully.

Mr. Clevenger's patience was fast approaching the breaking point. He now spoke with dangerous calm.

"Talk sense, Chink! For the last time I'm asking you. Will you come across with the cash money for that stuff? Yes or no?"

"No can do."

"All right," Nate grunted. "Here I come."

Lee Wung's beady eyes glittered like a snake's, as he watched the irate Mr. Clevenger. Things happened quickly. Nate was on the Chinese with the speed of a whirlwind, but the wily Oriental acted even more speedily.

From some invisible hiding place in his loose garments there flashed forth an evil-looking strip of thin blue steel—keen-edged as a razor blade. As a rattler strikes, the knife point slipped up from below, the full force of a vicious thrust behind it.

Clevenger realized his danger just in time, leaping backward even as he felt the keen weapon pricking against the skin of his abdomen. Snarling, lips drawn back over teeth that resembled the fangs of an animal, Nate grabbed for a weapon, forgetting that his guns were missing. For an instant he crouched, glaring wildly at Lee Wung, who, knife in hand, calmly waited a renewal of the attack that had nearly ended in disaster for Nate Clevenger.

Apparently the latter was convinced that his own bulk and strength would be no match for his lithe opponent's agility and skill in handling that deadly knife. Abruptly he straightened up, turning toward the door.

"I'll get you yet," was his final savage threat as he departed.

Lee Wung's blade went back into winter quarters, no trace of emotion showing on the yellow parchment face.

"Uncontrolled passion is a stinging adder, which first blinds and then destroys," he intoned. With which quotation from the wisdom of the sages, Lee Wung went to renew acquaintance with his neglected bowl of rice. Peace once more reigned in the humble establishment.

Fifteen minutes later the warning bell again tinkled, and Lee followed his usual custom of a prudent reconnaissance. His first visitor of the evening, he who had

been so grievously disappointed in the matter of certain shirts, was back again. If Lee Wung was surprised or in any degree perturbed, he admirably concealed the fact as he shuffled forth.

"No glot laundly. Thlursday," he explained resignedly, as though reconciled to the never ending impatience characteristic of the Occidental race.

"I didn't come about them shirts—not this time. You savvy this, Lee Wung?" and the stranger produced that same oblong parcel which Nate Clevenger had originally received from Greasy Dan and then delivered, perforce, to the first of the two importunate highwaymen.

Lee Wung betrayed some little interest.

"Where you clatchee?" he queried.

"That's my business. How much you give me for it?"

Lee prudently went to some pains to satisfy himself as to the genuineness of the package. Then:

"Thlee hunded dlollar," he announced briskly.

"Not enough. Make it five hundred. That's dirt cheap, too."

"No can do. Thlee flifty."

Lee Wung's caller spent some time in vainly attempting to work the price to a higher figure, but the Chinese was obdurate. Three hundred and fifty was his limit, and at length the parcel passed into his possession for that sum.

About the same time Mr. Ed Bates was receiving a visitor in his room at the hotel, no other than the charitable bandit who had so kindly offered to stake Nate Clevenger to the price of two drinks.

"No luck at all," he said in reply to an eager question. "Somebody else beat me to it."

"What!" Bates exclaimed.

"Right! That baby was stripped clean. Even his guns were gone, and they wasn't a solitary copper or anything else in his clothes. We're not the only folks working this side of the street, chief."

"So it would seem," Ed Bates remarked thoughtfully.

VI

BACK in the mountains, westward from Black Butte, lay the small mining settlement of Placerville. As the name implies, the original prospecting had been done by red-shirted men armed with pan and shovel. Placer deposits are quickly worked out, but

before the last of the argonauts moved on to new fields there came the discovery of the mother lode.

At the cost of much time and labor, up-to-date machinery had been freighted in, and a modest stamp mill erected. This gave steady employment to a number of men, and produced for its fortunate owners an equally steady flow of gold.

Transportation between Placerville and Black Butte, the nearest railroad station, was by stage. Once a week the clean-up of the mine was shipped out in the form of ingots of pure gold. The value of his shipment varied somewhat, but averaged not far from twelve thousand dollars. An armed employee of the company traveled with this treasure, not relinquishing his guardianship until the bullion was safely turned over to the express agent at Black Butte.

The stage driver was known as Cat Eye Thompkins, the picturesque portion of that appellation due to the fact that its bearer was gifted with the uncanny power of being able to see in the dark. At least Cat Eye Thompkins claimed this gift, and on more than one occasion had publicly made good his claim, to the chagrin of certain skeptical gentlemen who had foolishly ventured to lay wagers to the contrary.

Cat Eye Thompkins swore fretfully, while waiting in disgusted impatience on the seat of his vehicle, which was drawn up before the office of the Golden Reward Mining Company. This was the second occasion in a month that the shipment of bullion had caused him a delay. It was now well along in the afternoon, and whatever pretensions he might make as to seeing in the dark, the stage driver preferred to cover those treacherous miles of mountain road by daylight.

"It's a wonder they wouldn't git that there stuff ready on time," he murmured plaintively.

After some further delay a man emerged from the office, carrying a substantial leather bag.

"Heavy, eh?" Thompkins remarked.

"I'll say so, since you ask me. Sixty pounds, if an ounce. Some nice little piece of change there. The old lode ain't weakening any. No, sir; I'd say she was a getting healthier right along."

"Where's Jake Fremont?" Cat Eye had noted the absence of the guard who usually accompanied him.

"Jake's sick. Something he et for dinner up to the widow's boarding house this noon turned his stomach inside out. I know what it was he et, and I know what he's got. P-tomaine poisoning, it is." The speaker quaintly gave the initial letter of Mr. Fremont's malady its full value, thereby generously making the word a present of an extra syllable.

Proud of his acquaintance with medical terms, he dwelt at length on the symptoms and causes of that dread disease, emphasizing the dangers which accompanied canned crab meat as an article of diet. Of this, it seemed, the unfortunate Mr. Fremont had rashly partaken.

"I warned him against it," the narrator went on in gloomy satisfaction. "I told him canned crab was likely to be chock full of p-tomaines, that would go ranting and r'aring through his gizzard like a charge of shot through a sage hen. One taste of that there crab meat was enough for me. I could tell they was something wrong with it by the ripe flavor; but Jake, he allowed as how my taste wan't educated up to table luxuries like canned crab.

"It's a dish for an eepicure, Sandy," he says, shoveling her down real enthusiastic. 'You ain't no judge of choice viands,' he says, quite scornful. 'A gent like you,' he says, 'would turn up his nose at Rooshian caviar or patty de foy grass. You'd be a terrible flop in high society, Sandy,' he says.

"I ain't laying no claim to be an eepicure, Jake," I told him. 'What's more, I don't intend to give no defunct crabs a first-class funeral in my own private burying grounds. My stomach ain't yawping for patent fodder like them things you just mentioned,' I tells him. 'As a last warning from one gent to another, you better lay off that canned crab, Jake. It's loaded, and the time fuse is a-sputtering. But you might as well argue with a cayuse that's cultivated an appetite for purple loco weed as that there stiff-necked gent. An hour, or mebbly less, after he's et dinner he begins to groan, and the longer he groans the harder he groans. Them p-tomaines sure can raise hell with a man's boiler."

Cat Eye had remained a silent although appreciative listener during this garrulity.

"Ain't they going to send somebody along in Jake's place?" he queried, when his companion seemed momentarily to have run down.

"That engineer in charge of running the tunnels is going with you. I disremember his name, but you know the feller."

"You don't mean that there tenderfoot, Fred Sommers, do you?" Cat Eye asked anxiously.

"Sure I do. That's him. Fred Sommers. Funny how I forget his name, now ain't it?"

Cat Eye's face registered consternation.

"No!" he exclaimed feelingly. "Say, he'll be some guard, that chap. Mebby he knows a lot about shoving holes through the hard rock; but I'm asking you, what good would he be if some road agent took a notion to stick me up? Looks like I'll have to drive with one hand and shoot with the other."

"He's going, anyway. I see him loading a sawed-off scatter gun jest now in the office."

Cat Eye heaved a sigh of patient resignation and shrugged philosophically.

"I'm a durned, slab-sided, lantern-jawed old fool to ride with a pilgrim like that," he grumbled. "It certainly will be a piece of good luck if he don't blow the top of my head off with that scatter gun. You couldn't git it away from him before we start, could you, Sandy? Jest as a favor to an old friend?"

Thompkins ceased speaking as the object of his remarks appeared on the steps leading from the office. The young engineer, a recent graduate from an Eastern mining school, seemed rather overimpressed with the responsibility and importance of his task. He nodded to Cat Eye, who gloomily moved over to make room on the seat. Then the driver released the brake, cracking his long bull whip viciously.

"Giddap!" he shouted.

The four horses surged forward against the traces as if actuated by a common spring, plunging on at a mad gallop, while the heavy stage rocked wildly over the stony, uneven road behind them. Cat Eye, his feet braced against the dashboard, arms sawing back on the reins, cast a side glance at his companion. The jaws of the substitute guard were clamped tight together; the shotgun had slipped, muzzle down, between his legs, while each hand clasped with frantic desperation the edge of the broad seat.

"Guard, huh!" the stage driver muttered disrespectfully under his breath, teeth working on a man-size portion of eating

tobacco. "I'll guard him, I will!" Then to the four horses: "Come on, you lazy bunch of flea-bitten loafers. Shake your laigs and travel. We ain't got till Christmas. Move along, daw-gone your measly hides!"

The bull whip cracked, dire threat in its pistol-like reports. Eyes rolling, ears laid back, the horses responded to their driver's invocation. They traveled.

The demoralized passenger saved his hat by a lucky grab with his right hand, necessarily abandoning one half of his anchorage to the seagoing hack in the process. All the young man's dignity and most of his importance had vanished before they were five minutes on the road. He in his turn cast a glance at his fellow, as if marveling that a man could sit so serenely at ease during such violent progress.

"D-do you g-go like this all the w-way?" he stammered.

Cat Eye deftly shot a yellow stream over the port side.

"Sometimes we go faster," he explained, "and then again we sometimes don't go so fast. It all depends." He failed to mention on what it depended.

"I was j-just thinking," the passenger enunciated with some difficulty, "that if you t-travel m-much faster, you need a b-blacksmith along to m-make repairs more'n you need a g-guard."

Cat Eye began to thaw a bit toward his companion, who seemed, after all, to be rather a good sport.

"He's gentled a heap, looks like," the driver reflected, and charitably curbed in some degree the reckless pace of his fiery steeds.

Assuredly that road was not made for nervous passengers. In one spot it might be precariously clinging to the edge of a cliff, the walls of which dropped away for a sheer fall of hundreds of feet—with nothing but the skill of the driver and the sure-footedness of his horses between them and eternity.

Again it would round a curve so sharp that making the turn without accident seemed well-nigh impossible. But they always got by, and the sincere admiration which young Mr. Sommers felt for Cat Eye's driving skill increased tremendously. He himself had had much experience at handling horses—but under far different conditions.

The afternoon wore on; gradually they

were getting out of the mountains into the range country. Traveling was still rough, but not as bad as it had been earlier.

In a narrow defile, Cat Eye suddenly pulled in his horses with a mild expletive. A small landslide just ahead effectively blocked the road. The stage driver produced a couple of shovels, and the two at once tore into the obstruction, Cat Eye mumbling and grumbling to himself, now and then pausing to look up toward the spot from which the slide had descended, with a doubtful shake of his head.

It was nearly dark when they at last had the road cleared and were again ready to proceed on their journey. Sommers noticed that his comrade had shoved the holster of the Colt he carried around to the front, within easy reach. The driver's eyes roved ceaselessly about, stabbing here and there through the gathering gloom.

The Easterner sensed a sudden tension in the air, and belated doubts as to his own value should a crisis actually develop began to impress themselves uncomfortably on his brain. At first this notion of playing armed guard to a shipment of bullion had seemed a gay sort of adventure; now it savored of grim earnestness, and all the gaiety had vanished. Instinctively he found himself imitating Cat Eye's watchfulness.

For some time nothing had been said by either man; the jingle of harness, the sharp ring of steel-shod hoofs on stone, and the creaking of the heavy stage were the only sounds to mark their progress. At last Cat Eye spoke.

"I dunno," he said in a hoarse whisper, "but I got a hunch they's a stick-up artist on the road to-night. That rock slide looked to me like it was done a purpose to hold us up till it got late. If they's anything doing the most likely place for him to be waiting fer us lies jest ahead."

The guard's body grew taut, a pleasurable tinkle playing up and down his spine. The horses trotted briskly forward. Then Cat Eye murmured, his voice almost inaudible:

"Here's the spot."

Sommers, held in the spell of a nameless premonition, almost stopped breathing as the stage entered the danger zone—a lonely cut with rocks on either side. He knew they were going to be held up—there—in that very spot. Sommers was not afraid, yet a strange sort of buck fever chained his muscles.

"Hands up!" The Easterner was not surprised as a harsh voice incisively cut the dimness just ahead, a dimness masking an indefinite shape which had materialized among the rocks.

Events followed almost too quickly for the tenderfoot to grasp them. In a vague sort of way he realized that he and his companion were outlined against the sky in such manner as to give the bandit a big advantage.

Cat Eye reached for his pistol. Instantly there came a vivid flash and a crashing report from the outlaw, and the stage driver slumped forward, his weapon clattering to the floor of the vehicle.

"Drop that gun and stick up your hands!" growled the bandit. Nothing else was to be done. Slowly, unwillingly, Sommers obeyed, hating himself for being unable to cope with the emergency.

The outlaw had been mounted. Now he swung down from his horse to approach the stage, his first move being to secure all weapons belonging to its occupants, and tossing them off to one side. Next he lifted from the stage the heavy bag containing the gold, backing off toward his horse, gun still in evidence despite the darkness which concealed the fellow's identity. An instant later he was gone.

"As a guard I'm a flat failure! To sit there, with a gun across my knees, and let that chap pot poor old Cat Eye!" Bitterly the young engineer berated himself as he tenderly lifted the wounded driver to a more comfortable position in the body of the stage. In that scanty light it was difficult to determine how badly Thompkins was hurt. He still breathed, at any rate.

"I've got to get him to town as quickly as I can. I'm sorry, old-timer," he regretfully addressed the unconscious man. "I haven't been much help so far. I meant all right, but I guess it takes more than good intentions to put a hard job across—especially when a chap's green at that kind of a job. I lost the gold, but, by thunder, I'm not going to lose you!"

Hastily, in a crude way, he bandaged the bullet wound in the old man's shoulder; then climbed up to the front seat and took the reins. The horses, restless from the shooting, and feeling a strange hand behind them, were inclined to be fractious, but the young Easterner was not green at this job. Furthermore, in his present mood, he was not to be trifled with.

"Come on, you nags!" he growled. "Be good, or there'll be trouble. And the Lord knows we've had enough of that already."

The animals made one or two half-hearted attempts to try out this new driver, finding themselves promptly and ruthlessly checked. Accordingly they accepted the change with becoming humility.

Two hours later—progress had been slow in deference to the wounded man—the belated stage pulled up before a brightly lighted saloon at Black Butte. The hour of its arrival was sufficient indication that something unusual had happened. Quickly half a dozen men were crowding about the vehicle.

"Cat Eye's wounded," Sommers told them, leaping down from his seat. "We were held up on the way, and the road agent shot Thompkins when he tried to pull his gun."

The startling news spread rapidly. Other men came running from all directions.

"Where's Jake Fremont? What about the guard?" Questions came thick and fast, while gentle hands lifted out the wounded driver.

"Fremont was sick and couldn't come. So I took his place as guard," Sommers confessed miserably.

Thompkins was carried into the saloon, where a primitive first aid was administered, pending the doctor's arrival. Sommers now found himself a target for innumerable questions.

"It was so dark I couldn't tell anything about the bandit," he repeated patiently.

"I wonder if Cat Eye saw the fellow before he was shot," some one remarked.

They had been forcing a few drops of whisky in between the stage driver's clenched teeth. Now, suddenly, he sat up.

"I don't know who the guy was," he said distinctly. "Had a cloth over his face. But he rode a cayuse marked with a white quarter moon blazed on the hip." Then he slipped back into unconsciousness.

For a second or two the room was quiet, men looking silently from one to another. Finally one spoke.

"Only hoss marked that way that I know belongs to that cow-puncher who hired out to Miss Stirling."

Sheriff Pease hurried in at this instant, and was quickly made acquainted with what facts the crowd possessed.

"White quarter moon on the hip, eh?" he mused. "Well, old Cat Eye sure made

good his reputation. That ought to help us a lot."

"Wilson's the man you want sheriff," a member of the group declared confidently. "Larry Wilson done it. Ain't no manner of doubt. He's the chap you want. Let's go an' get him."

"What's that you're saying?" a hard, cold voice inquired—and Larry elbowed his way forward. He had just entered the saloon, in company with Ed Bates. Since that night at the Cowboy's Home, Bates had been hanging around town for no reason that was particularly obvious, and an acquaintance had developed between him and Larry. The latter's challenging glance now turned pointedly on various members of the gathering in turn; no one seemed willing to face it, for rumors of this newcomer's deadly skill at gun slinging had been spread abroad.

"Who wants me—and why?" Larry demanded, thumbs hooked negligently in the belt from which hung the gun holster, tied down to the puncher's right leg by a rawhide thong.

VII

A FIERCE exultation throbbed in Virginia's heart, strange contrast to the dull despair which had held her not long before. She was winning her fight against the cattle barons; winning, that is, thanks to Larry Wilson. For the girl gave this cow-puncher, who had drifted in from the outside as though sent by Providence, full credit for the fact that her flocks were grazing, unmolested, on the forbidden grass of the open range.

The sun of late afternoon was streaming across the broken lava country to the west as Virginia, a song on her lips, moved about her living room, putting it to rights. She was vaguely conscious of missing Larry, who had ridden in to town.

The room contained a desk, formerly property of her brother, and Virginia approached it with the idea of slipping one or two odds and ends into a drawer. The drawer stuck, and when she pulled the harder, it gave way suddenly, falling to the floor and spilling forth its contents.

"Botheration!" Virginia exclaimed, stooping to pick up the mess.

Her eyes caught sight of an indistinct something in the depths of the recess from which she had torn the drawer. It proved to be a notebook, and when she opened it

curiously she found inscribed on the flyleaf, in her brother's hand, the following:

TO MY SISTER, VIRGINIA

The book was a diary, in which her brother had recorded many of the details connected with his ill-starred venture at the Bar Y Bar. Once, in a letter to Virginia, Ralph Stirling had mentioned this diary, promising that some time he would send it to her, a promise he had never kept.

After dipping here and there into the record, Virginia went back to the beginning to read it through. Many of the entries were addressed to her personally, written in the style of intimate correspondence. The first date was a trifle more than two years before Ralph's death.

Through the earlier pages ran a spirit of optimism. Ralph had embarked on his enterprise full of enthusiasm and rich in hope. Other men had become wealthy in the cattle business—why not he? Frequent references were made to Timothy Woodford, who, it seemed, had rendered invaluable services in helping his nephew get started. One entry ran:

Uncle T. is a brick. I don't know how I could have managed without him. He has a vast knowledge of the cattle industry, and his wide acquaintance throughout the region has smoothed the way for me. I find myself constantly going to him for advice, with which he is always generous, for, after all, Virginia, there is a lot to this business; more than I ever suspected.

But things did not go well with young Stirling's venture. The weather had been against him—an unusually dry season, which brought a scarcity of grass and water. Again, a severe storm had caused heavy losses among younger stock.

From time to time, adult cattle, kept within the ranch limits, had been dying, victims of some obscure disorder which passed by the herds belonging to his neighbors. Virginia's heart bled for her brother, as she learned what discouragements and difficulties had beset him on all sides.

Ralph also deplored the lack of capital under which he was forced to operate. He wrote:

I made a fatal mistake when I tried to break into this game on a shoestring. To get away with that a chap has to be favored in all the breaks—and they're hitting me with a reverse twist. But I'll pull through eventually.

Uncle Timothy Woodford came to be spoken of less cordially. This was a gradu-

al development from the high regard which Ralph had at the beginning entertained for his mother's brother. Finally:

I am coming to the point of questioning Uncle T.'s wisdom. Twice now I have followed his advice against my own better judgment, and with results that were nearly disastrous. Also I am learning, rather late to be sure, that our dear uncle has been connected with one or two somewhat shady enterprises in the past. People of the better sort, it appears, do not rate him too highly.

One or two pages farther on:

One of my best riders, a fellow named Joe Peterson, left to-day. His brother is foreman of a ranch up in Wyoming, and wants Joe to join him. I like Joe, and we had a little talk before he went away. He seemed anxious to tell me something, yet hesitated. Finally I got this remark out of him:

"Mr. Stirling, if I were you I'd run my own ranch myself. Strikes me there's too much Tim Woodford and too little Ralph Stirling in this outfit."

The cowboys are usually taciturn, sparing of speech except among their intimates. Joe concluded with the following comment, which may be only too significant:

"I've known this Tim Woodford for three or four years, and heard a lot about him before that. I never knew him to work for anybody but himself."

In other words, Uncle T., according to Joe, has had his own interests at heart all along, instead of mine. He has been seeking my downfall. How could he hope to gain through my misfortune?

For a time no other mention was made of Timothy Woodford. Dates under which entries appeared in the diary were farther apart. Ralph, in the burden of trouble and uncertainty which he faced, was losing interest in his journal. A week, two weeks, or even a month might pass without his adding a single line. Then came this:

There is no longer any reasonable doubt. Uncle T. has deliberately plotted to ruin me, God alone knows why. He has given me bad advice when I sought suggestions from him—and even voluntarily. This I now know for a positive fact, though it is unnecessary to record here the sources of my information. What a poor blind fool I've been! So simple and so trusting!

Yet I cannot understand it. What reason could he have? That, however, is beside the point. Now I can guard against the man, knowing the evil within him. But what black treachery! God forgive me, I really believe he was responsible for the sickness among my steers. It was probably the result of poison! How else could they have died, since none of the neighboring ranches suffered similar losses?

My first impulse is to go to this scoundrel and have things out with him. It would be a precious consolation. Yet I have resolved to wait. My affairs are desperate, it is true, but there is a

chance that I may pull through. God grant that my awakening has not come too late!

"Poor Ralph!" Virginia murmured. The short, disconnected sentences which her brother had put down, the jerky, nervous strokes of his pen—all showed clearly the mental agony he suffered.

A week elapsed before the next entry, dated only a few days before her brother's death. It read:

I have just chanced on the most stupendous discovery! Rather, it may prove to be that. I almost fear to hope. So impossible, the wildest sort of dream! But why not? Stranger things have happened, and my knowledge of geology convinces me that the volcanic section of the ranch is at least favorable. Wealth untold! A life of ease and luxury—all that goes with it, for you, my dearest sister, and for me—an end of this ceaseless worry.

A two day lapse of time intervened before the next writing:

I begin to see daylight. Uncle T. knew of this, doubtless making the discovery long before I did, perhaps about the time I bought the Bar Y Bar. I have lately learned that Uncle T. has been far from as well fixed financially as I thought him; in fact, for some years has been living from hand to mouth, which explains why he did not buy the ranch for himself. Now he may have sought to ruin me in order to lower the value of the property, so that it could be obtained cheaply, provided he were able to get together sufficient funds for the purchase. But I would gladly have shared with him, had he only played fair.

Virginia came to the bottom of the page. In breathless interest she turned the sheet of paper, to meet with disappointment. That was the end of the diary. The last entry was under date of February 8. Ralph had died, very suddenly, of pneumonia, on the twelfth. With him went his undisclosed secret.

Slowly she closed the book, wiping the tears from her eyes in a spasm of grief. This brother, who had hoped to carve his fortune out of the West, had been very dear to her—that was one reason why she came out to live on the ranch which became her property at his death.

The girl's thoughts raced on in a tumult, the startling significance of the facts she had just learned pressing on her with overwhelming force.

If Timothy Woodford had plotted to ruin Ralph in order to bring about an easy securing of the Bar Y Bar for himself—and there appeared no doubt of that—he must have endeavored to do the same to-

ward her, and for the same reason. Virginia recalled that he had written to her, strongly urging that she put the property on the market, instead of trying to run it.

Also she recalled the advice he had given her, once her mind was made up—to embark in the sheep business under the prevailing circumstances, the actual conduct of that business after it was undertaken, the defiance of the cattlemen's order. Questionable advice, at least, from start to finish.

The thought of her sheep, stampeded over the jutting cliffs of Arroyo Seco, occurred to her. John Lindsley had denied that the cattlemen were behind that raid, and now Virginia was about ready to believe him. And the second raid, which had so nearly resulted horribly for herself! Could the inspiration of those outrages have come from nearer home than she had dreamed, conceived in the expectation that the cattle interests would be blamed?

"Oh!" she gasped hysterically, half sobbing. "It just can't be true! No one could be so wicked as that!"

Yet ugly facts remained to be faced—facts that would not down.

VIII

For an instant the saloon was deathly quiet, following Larry's cool inquiry as to why and wherefore he might be wanted. Then Sheriff Pease demanded:

"Where's that cayuse of yours with the white blaze?"

"Over at Kelly's stables. Been there since six o'clock."

"Humph!" the sheriff grunted. "And you?"

"Me? Why I ain't been scarce around town myself. Guess plenty of folks have seen me. If it's an alibi you're looking for, I reckon Bates here can accommodate."

"That being the case, I don't figure you're wanted at all," was the sheriff's comment. He scowled reflectively.

"Somebody's been trying to frame you, old top," Bates said in a low tone. "Your happening into town just at the right time spoiled it." To which Larry nodded understandingly. The sheriff's eyes narrowed, as he, too, overheard.

"Come over to my office where we can talk," he told them. "A few things I'd like to get off my chest." And, without paying further attention to the curious crowd in the saloon, Pease led the way to-

ward the jail building. Arrived at his private headquarters, the officer lit a lamp, hospitably waving his hand at an open box of cigars.

"This whole business is as plain as a wart on a man's nose," Bates asserted, biting into a cigar. "Larry's horse is the only one in the section with the white quarter moon, and that's easy to imitate with white paint. The stick-up lad knew Cat Eye Thompson would spot it."

"That same hunch occurred to me," Pease agreed. "I'm figuring the best way to get the chap is to start work at this end. Who's got it in for you?" he demanded of Larry.

For a moment the cowboy was silent.

"They's mebbly two or three hereabouts that wouldn't shed tears at the notion of attending my funeral," he remarked.

"Nate Clevenger?" Bates suggested.

"Had him in mind all the time," Pease assented. A sort of mutual understanding seemed to exist between him and Bates. "It's an easy ride from Strachan's over to the Placerville road. I saw Nate in town a little while ago. If he'd pulled the trick we'd naturally expect him to show up here before the stage pulled in. He could make better time, and it would make things look sweeter all around for him."

Pease interrupted himself to step to the door.

"Tom," he loudly called. Tom Brooks, his deputy, appeared.

"Go out and look up Nate Clevenger," the sheriff directed. "Bring him in here. If he don't want to come, you can use your own discretion. Need any help, Tom?"

"To get that four-flusher!" the deputy snorted. "Heck, no! I been wanting a chance to talk turkey to that bird for quite some time. I think I know right where to locate him."

After a reasonable delay the deputy returned—and Nate was with him, in a rather disheveled condition. Pease fixed the irate prisoner with a cold and fishy eye.

"Where did you hide that gold you took off the Placerville stage to-night?" he demanded sharply.

"I don't know anything about it, sheriff!" Nate cried in astonishment.

"Humph!" the sheriff growled. "I didn't expect you'd be ready to admit it, but lying ain't going to help you, Nate. The best thing for you to do is to spill the whole yarn."

"But what would I want to hold up any stage for?" Nate demanded angrily.

"Plenty of reasons. It was a profitable job—for anybody that could get away with it. Then you wanted to land Wilson here in bad, and being's you were too yellow to shoot it out with him like a good scout and a gentleman, you aimed to fix things so he'd receive credit for robbing the stage while you got the proceeds."

Clevenger controlled his righteous wrath by an effort.

"Can't you listen to reason?" he cried. "I ain't been near the road that stage travels—to-night or any other time. And I can prove it. I was—"

Nate suddenly chopped off his remarks, as he grasped just in time how damaging it might be to inform the sheriff as to his recent activities. Desperately he reflected, seeking a way out of his troubles. Nate had no wish to be saddled with the stage robbery, complicated by the added detail of the shooting, and he did not yet know that Cat Eye's wound was likely to prove less serious than at first anticipated.

"Well, speak up!" bellowed the sheriff impatiently. "What's the matter with you? Bite your tongue off? Where you been to-night?"

Nate recalled the drink he had denied himself through dread of being publicly seen in Black Butte, and cursed inwardly. That would have given him an air-tight alibi for the earlier part of the evening. As it was, things were not so good.

Lee Wung, if he so desired, could testify as to Nate's presence in his shop at about the time the robbery had been committed. Nate reasoned thus far, and brightened perceptibly. Lee Wung was unlikely to tell why Clevenger had visited him, since so doing would be condemning himself; they were blackened by the same soot. To be sure they had parted under rather strained relations, but Nate was now able to view the affair in a broad-minded way, and felt that he could overlook the Oriental's attempt on his life.

Sheriff Pease was becoming restive, and this meant more words from him.

"You certainly are a terrible flop at public speaking," he complained. "That is, when folks really want to hear the sweet tinkle of your voice. Now, if you got all them lies nicely arranged so they dovetail, let's go back to work. I'm asking you where you were the first part of this eve—"

ning, since you say you didn't stick up the stage."

"Here in town, on business," Nate parried. "That's where."

"Business, huh! Who with?"

"Lee Wung, the chink that runs the laundry."

At this point a shrewd observer might have noted a subtle change of expression on the face of Mr. Ed Bates. That expression indicated sudden gratified surprise and a quickened appreciation. He began regarding Mr. Nathan Clevenger fondly, as with a keen personal interest—an interest, however, that promised no great boon to its object.

One might almost have imagined that Bates was licking his chops, much as a hungry tiger in anticipation of a long deferred feast. The sheriff, intent on his examination of the prisoner, missed all this play of expression, as did Tom, the deputy. Larry, however, was not blind to it, but this was not Larry Wilson's show, and he decided to keep still.

"Lee Wung, eh?" Bill Pease went on. "I reckon you went to the Chink's place to get your laundry." He spoke in a tone of elaborate sarcasm, as if laundry was the last item one might be expected to seek at Lee Wung's. Nate grinned confidently and impudently at him.

"Sure, I was after my laundry."

Bates abruptly arose from his chair.

"Going out," he told them. "I'll be back in a minute. Call a brief recess in the inquisition, will you, sheriff?"

"Go ahead," said Pease benevolently. "We'll wait."

When Bates reappeared five minutes later a stranger was with him, but Nate Clevenger found in the appearance of this stranger something that vaguely disturbed him. He couldn't place the fellow, yet was certain that he had run across him in the not far distant past.

"Now, listen, Jimmy," Bates addressed his companion. "It occurs to me that you were guilty of a bull this evening, and tackled the wrong man. This couldn't by any chance be the party you went through, could it? The chap that was cleaned out before you got to him?"

With those words Nate Clevenger's brain was cleared of all doubts regarding the identity of the stranger brought in by Mr. Bates. He was no less than the charitable bandit, the second of the freebooters who

had victimized him on his way to Lee Wung's laundry.

"I sure fell down on the job," the newcomer admitted with a crestfallen air. "I don't know how or when I lost the other chap, but this is the guy I stuck up. I'm sorry I messed things."

"You don't need to be sorry, Jimmy," Bates yelled triumphantly. "It was the luckiest mistake you'll ever make. We were on the wrong trail all the time. This is the guy we want."

He turned to the sheriff.

"Let's have that other boarder I left with you a little while ago. I'd like to put him and Nate Clevenger together, shake 'em up, and see what drops out."

Pease nodded to the deputy, who left. They heard him unlock a cell door. Then, under Tom's watchful guardianship, the imperturbable Lee Wung made his shuffling entrance.

"I really owe you an apology, sheriff," Bates began, "for not telling more about my business in Black Butte than the mere fact that I was in Federal service. The point is there's been a lot of opium smuggled into the United States from Old Mexico, and some of the dope has been passing through this very town."

"Opium, eh!" the sheriff ejaculated. "That's a new one to me. Why would they pick a place like this to run the stuff through?"

"Best place in the world," Bates assured him. "Out of the way, and all that. Now I had it figured out that a certain man here in town would have a package of dope in his possession to-night, delivered by a chap who brings it up from the border, a chap by name of Greasy Dan. Our man would then turn it over to the Chinese, whose job was to pass the stuff along. I had everything filled out but the connecting link between Dan and Lee Wung, but it was undesirable to make an arrest until we were sure."

"So for a blind I detailed Jimmy here to play the part of a holdup guy, in order to steer his man away from the notion that officers were on the trail. Jimmy unaccountably blundered, picking up Clevenger instead of the man actually under suspicion. In the meantime, somebody else had hopped Nate, so my operator found him stripped clean."

"Next thing we heard that Lee Wung had already received the consignment, and

we decided to nab him before the dope left his possession. Which brings the affair right down to the present."

"You say Nate was held up twice to-night?" Pease asked. "What about that other lad?"

"He remains to be accounted for. But I've got the goods on Nate. That's the big thing, and I think I know where Lee Wung got the opium."

Suddenly he produced that mysterious little parcel.

"Where you get this, Lee?"

Lee Wung had apparently been taking sage counsel with himself, reaching the conclusion that the game was, to all practicable purposes, played out. He was prepared to throw himself on the mercy of the court, so to speak.

"Catchee off fella. Thlee hunded flifty dlollar."

"You any idea where he picked it up, Lee Wung?"

The Chinese made no reply, but his unblinking eyes strayed toward the disconsolate Mr. Nathan Clevenger.

"I thought so," Bates grunted. "There's our first holdup chap, the one that beat you to it, Jimmy. Now I wonder how in the deuce he got wise to what was stirring. What did he look like, Lee?"

"Blig fella. Clatch sclar here," Lee replied with engaging frankness, and his forefinger traced a line ranging downward from his left ear toward the chin. "Slomeblooddy knife him, guess, mlebby."

Bates's assistant spoke up eagerly.

"Say, chief, Greasy Dan used to pal around with a chap answering to that description. Reynolds, his name was. I bet he got a line on the proposition from Dan. Perhaps Dan tipped him off to stick up Nate and sell the dope to Lee Wung himself. Likely they was to split the returns between 'em."

This was too much for Mr. Clevenger, who fluently consigned Greasy Dan and all persons associated with him to the bottomless pit.

"Ah!" Bates purred in satisfaction. "So you're ready to admit your share, are you?"

"Hell, yes!" Clevenger spoke in sullen defiance. "I know when I'm licked. You got it on me, ain't you?"

"I rather think we have, Nate," Bates assured him pleasantly.

"You got all you want out of these chaps for now?" Pease inquired.

"I'm through with 'em," Bates replied, and accordingly the two prisoners were conducted away.

IX

FOR a moment the three men left in the room were silent, glancing speculatively at one another.

"So Nate didn't hold up the stage," Bates murmured. Then Sheriff Pease remarked, as if to himself:

"I happen to know Tim Woodford bought himself some white paint two, three days ago. Now it occurs to me to wonder what he'd be needing of white paint."

"Might have had it in mind to daub a quarter moon on some cayuse," Bates suggested solemnly. "What you been doing to Tim Woodford, Larry?"

"Nothing—except take a job helping that pretty niece of his graze her sheep on the open range." Larry's voice now became slightly petulant. "You two gents seem to know a pile more'n me about certain things that's been going on hereabouts lately. What you know regarding Woodford, anyway?"

"Nothing good," Bates grunted. "To tell the truth, he's the chap I counted on getting to-night for the dope running. I've investigated him, and his past is as crooked as a bad lands trail. Only reason he didn't get into the dope game was that he wasn't invited. He's in bad need of cash right now. Oh, I've kept pretty close tab on Deacon Woodford."

"Tim never held up that stage personally," Pease contributed. "He ain't got guts enough."

"It don't take guts to plan—and then let somebody else pull the stunt," Bates said. "You know those two bad actors he's been thick with?"

"Meaning Art Dooling and Fritz Slagle, I s'pose?"

"Those are the birds. We know they and Woodford were together several times, probably hatching out some scaly proposition. That's along when I first struck town, or a little after. Dooling's been around since, but the other lad disappeared. Don't know where he went; but take my word for it, anything those three put their heads together on would be dirty."

"Keno!" Pease agreed cordially. "I can see how they might plan to rob the stage, but I ain't connected them with Larry here. Not yet. Why would they

try to hang the job on him? The cattlemen might have it in for him, but why these folks? I allus like to find a motive behind a thing like that."

Larry had been saying little during the various developments in the sheriff's office, contenting himself with playing the part of an appreciative listener. Now suddenly he spoke up.

"What sort of looking chap was this Slagle?" he inquired.

Pease told him.

"Then I know where he went. He's one of the two that attacked Miss Stirling—the chap I salivated. Dooling must have been the other."

"The hell you say!" Pease displayed considerable gratification at this news. "There's the motive I been wanting. But the way the story come to me, the fellows you saved Miss Stirling from was the same ones that stampeded her flock over the cliff."

"She believed they were the same," Larry returned.

"Then Miss Stirling's uncle is back of her trouble," Pease exclaimed. "Both Lindsley and Jud Strachan told me that the cattle interests weren't involved in either raid. But why would Woodford have it in for his niece?"

"Strikes me the motive can wait," Larry said dryly. Then a hard note crept into his voice. "I'd say we better get hold of Woodford before he makes any more trouble for Miss Virginia. I don't care much about the robbery; but the way I feel now, there'll be hot lead flying if she's bothered again." He stirred restlessly in his chair.

"I don't blame you a bit, Larry," Bates told him soothingly. "Only here's a suggestion. We're not sure about this yet. We've got no proof that Woodford is sewed up in the robbery, though it looks as if he was. Also, it looks like there's a connection between it and Miss Stirling's affairs."

"Here's my proposal. We'll locate him now, and keep him in sight till morning. If Dooling robbed the stage, following out Woodford's plans, it would be natural for him to get in touch with his confederate. That way we might get 'em both. It's a long chance, maybe, but it's worth trying, and nothing to lose either way things break. They aren't likely to start anything against Miss Virginia right away, so she's safe for the present. How does that sound?"

"O. K.," the sheriff agreed, and Larry also assented, although with reluctance.

"I ought not to leave her on the ranch alone for so long," he muttered dejectedly. "What I want is one crack at the skunk who's plotted all her troubles, too."

"Just hold your horses, old top," Bates advised. "You'll have your chance for that crack before long. And we might as well kill two birds with one stone, if the chance offers."

It was quite late by this time—well after midnight, in fact. No difficulty was experienced in locating Woodford, whose sleeping quarters were above his office. The man himself was working at a desk, alone.

"You've done your share for awhile," Larry told his two companions. "My turn now. I'll keep an eye on this bird, and if anybody wants to talk to him, he'll have to interview me first." There was a grim suggestion in Larry's tone. "You fellows go and get some sleep."

"Don't let him give you the slip," the sheriff warned.

"He won't," Larry declared warmly.

"If he tries to get away you can arrest him," said Pease. "I'm making you a temporary deputy right now."

Shortly after Bates and the sheriff departed, Woodford went upstairs to bed. The night dragged slowly on with no startling developments, save that Larry once thought he saw a man lurking about the side of Woodford's office, although nothing developed from it. A tumult of thoughts raced through the watcher's mind, all of them revolving about Virginia Stirling, like so many planets around a central sun. Wistfully he wondered if she were thinking of him, and, if so, what she thought.

At length the dawn came. Woodford arose in good season, presently appearing in his office, where he again busied himself at his desk. Larry still lurked in a position where no one from the office would be likely to see him.

Suddenly he saw a missile about the size of an egg fly in an arc from some point of concealment behind him. It was white, as if wrapped in paper. There came the tinkle of glass as the object crashed through the window near which Woodford sat.

Larry's brain worked quickly. This stone, flung by some unknown person, carried news, the importance of which was proved by the desperate means taken to deliver it. If he went after the sender he

might easily fail to get him, and the message would surely be lost. Larry decided on the message, leaving the man behind it to be dealt with later.

Instantly he dashed across the street, pulling his gun as he ran. Knowing that the door would be locked, he plunged, shoulder first, through the broken window, heedless of possible cuts from the shattered pane of glass.

Woodford, in the very act of unwrapping the paper from a fragment of stone, glanced up in startled surprise. Wilson covered him.

"Drop it!" he snapped.

Woodford's belt and pistol lay on his desk, within easy reach. For a second he hesitated, as if weighing his chances. Then he submitted to the inevitable, whereupon Larry grabbed the paper, before the other had a chance to read it. Next, having secured Woodford's weapon, he was ready to look over the intercepted communication. The script was an almost illegible scrawl, but Larry managed to decipher it. This is what he read:

Yours smart aint you? Planning to throw me down. Im getting wise to you, you ——— Didn't I tell you after that damned gun-slinger salivated Fritz I wouldnt be satisfied with nothing less than a fifty fifty split?

I been trying to get word to you all night, but you know who was hanging around, and I didnt dast take a chance. But I wanted you to hear from me.

I know theys something big stirring about that ranch, even if you was mighty careful to keep it to yourself. I want mine, see? Im going to get it too, and I know how. When you read this Im on my way. You neednt be so damn fussy about a bodys touching that girl.

Next time you hear from me Ill be sitting pretty, with something thatll guarantee me getting off with a whole skin and plenty of gravy—which is a pile more than youll get unless you watch your step.

I pulled the trick O. K. I got the gold hid, your share is waiting for you—if you play straight.

This message was only partly clear to Larry Wilson, but he understood enough to appreciate the fact that immediate devilry was being planned against Virginia, apart from Woodford's own plans; so much seemed clear from the threat in the intercepted communication. The stage robbery was also cleared up, with Woodford and his partner both guilty.

"Come along," he said, brusquely. "We're going over to the jail."

"What was on that paper?" Woodford demanded uneasily.

"None of your damned business," Larry informed him.

Mr. Timothy Woodford turned a delicate shade of purple, but, paying no attention to his prisoner's expostulations, Larry hustled him back to the jail, where he found Bates and the deputy. Pease had gone to breakfast. Bates displayed considerable concern as he read the crude message.

"We've got to ride for the Bar Y Bar," Larry snapped. "The lad who wrote this has a start on us, and they's no telling what he'll do. We ain't any time to lose. We won't even stop to pick up Pease. Woodford's going with us. When we get to Miss Virginia's place we may need him—bad, too."

Horses were immediately available. At the moment of their departure, Larry spoke savagely to Woodford.

"Listen here, you polecat. I want no funny tricks from you this trip, savvy? I judge you've been pulling some awful rough stuff at Miss Virginia's expense, while I'm admitting that I ain't posted on all the details. Whatever you been doing, you're through, and whatever plans you been cherishing for the future stop right here. Get that! Right now I'm as peevish and irritable as a rattler with a sore belly, and I'm sure looking for an excuse to hop all over you. It would be prudent for you to act real pretty."

Woodford mustered an air of injured dignity.

"This whole proceeding is an outrage!" Then he appealed to the deputy. "I demand your protection, as an officer, against these fellows. They are irresponsible, and may do me violence."

"Appeal to Larry," rejoined Tom Brooks languidly. "Pease made him a deputy last night, just so he could arrest you whenever he wanted to." Then Tom grinned reassuringly. "I guess they won't hurt you much—if you behave yourself."

Larry swung impatiently to his horse. "We're wasting time," he remarked meaningly.

The miles which lay between Black Butte and the Bar Y Bar ranch flew by under the thudding hoofs of the horses. Larry, a victim of vague forebodings, set a hard pace, relentlessly forcing Woodford on before. Few words were spoken.

Now and then, as opportunity offered, Woodford cast a furtive glance at Wilson. The man was badly frightened, obviously,

and it was equally apparent that he derived little consolation from the stern harshness of the cowboy's features. Woodford also appeared puzzled, as if he had no idea of what might be back of this furious ride.

At length the scattered buildings of the ranch came within view, still hazy in the distance. No signs of life were visible as the riders drew nearer. The place appeared deserted, the east door of the main building swinging open, a bad sign. Larry threw himself from his horse and entered, a horrible, nameless fear tugging at his heart.

"Miss Virginia!" he called anxiously.

There was no response, and he hurried on into the living room, where a scene of disorder met his gaze. Chairs were overturned, books and magazines littering the floor. Sick at heart, Larry went out to rejoin Bates, who waited with Woodford.

"We're too late," he said dully. "He's been here and gone, Virginia with him." In his overwhelming sense of personal loss, Larry unconsciously dropped the miss which he had always used in speaking of the girl. "God, if I could only get my fingers on his throat!"

"Hold on, old man," was Bates's quick response. "Don't take it so hard. That fellow wasn't intending any harm to Miss Stirling—not right now, at least. It's plain from the note that he planned to use her as a sort of hostage to protect himself. Likely he's going to hold her for ransom."

"I guess that's so, too," Larry agreed, brightening a little.

"The question is, where would he take her?" Bates mused. "He hasn't much of a start, but we can't go off blind; too much room in this country. Aren't there any people here on the place?"

"No one that counts in a jam," Larry told him. "An old Mexican woman who does the cooking, and the herders—nothing but kids. They're probably looking after the sheep now, and the old woman's so deaf she never heard a thing. I know these folks; they're hopeless."

"We've got to have some kind of a tip, though," Bates persisted. "Bull luck is no kind of a guide to follow."

"We got Woodford!" Larry yelled in triumph. "Didn't I tell you we might need him bad?" Then to Woodford: "That ornery pardner of yours has abducted Miss Virginia. Seems like he's counting on using her to save his skin, and get himself a fifty-fifty split in some shady

scheme you been hatching. Now where do you figure he'd be likely to head for in such a case?"

"I know nothing about it," Woodford said coldly. "I'm sorry if Virginia has got into trouble, but I'm not surprised at anything that might happen, after her hiring a blackguard like you to work for her."

Larry's eyes narrowed, danger signals of mounting passion; cold, uncomfortable shivers played up and down Woodford's spine as he stared into them, half fascinated, like a rabbit helpless under the spell of a huge diamond-back.

"That's enough, Woodford!" Larry told him. "You're lying. But from now on you tell the truth. You're going to tell me what you know; where you think she might be. Ever hear of the stunts the Apaches used to pull on prisoners. Listen!"

Softly he spoke, in a purring sort of voice, describing unprintable, unimaginable horrors of torture.

"That's what's going to happen to you if Virginia comes to harm," he told Woodford in grim ferocity, "if you don't do all you can to help us save her. For one hour I'll forget I'm a human being—and treat you like you deserve."

Woodford shudderingly appealed to Ed Bates.

"You wouldn't let him, would you?"

"It's not my affair," was Ed's indifferent reply. "Larry owns you body and soul, so far as I'm concerned. You'd better listen to reason and tell him what he wants. Good God, man! Aren't you decent enough to do it without being forced?"

Woodford drew a sudden breath, expelling it as if at the same time he expelled from his system something distasteful. A portion of the evil lurking in his face vanished as he addressed Larry.

"Your friend is right. I must confess to highly questionable practices in the matter of my niece's property." Woodford spoke in a quiet tone, a dignity that compelled belief. "But I neither wished nor plotted harm to the girl herself. All my life I have been afflicted with a perverseness—a love of evil for evil's own sake. I say this in explanation. The attack on my niece, this abduction, are contrary to my orders. I will do all I can to aid in the rescue."

"That's better," Larry said, his eyes softening. "I'm sorry for what I just said to you. I don't reckon I could have gone

through with it, anyway. Now where do you think he'd take her?"

"One possible place occurs to me—the big cave over in the lava country. Its location is known to—my fellow criminal."

"On Virginia's ranch, you mean?"

Woodford nodded.

"I didn't know they was any cave over there," Larry remarked, "and I don't believe she did. Never mentioned it to me. Well, let's ride. You show the way, Woodford, and travel!"

No more time was lost. The horses had recovered their wind during the brief resting period, and now went on at the same furious gallop that had brought them from Black Butte. After awhile, above the thudding hoofbeats, came the sound of distant gun shots.

"What do you make of that?" Ed demanded of Larry.

"Dunno." He appealed to Woodford. "That shooting sound like it was over at the cave we're heading for?"

Woodford seemed worried, prey to a tardy realization that Virginia was caught fast in the web spun by his own sinister designs.

"I'm afraid that's where it is," he answered glumly.

X

Buck had found his feelings toward Larry Wilson undergoing a gradual change. This dated from the time he had virtually accused Nate Clevenger of lying when they discussed the gossip attributed to Larry, although at the moment Buck's defense of his rival was due solely to dislike of Clevenger.

It was an open secret throughout the cow country that Buck and his father had violently disagreed over the matter of their foreman. Strachan, Sr., insisted on keeping Clevenger because of the man's practical knowledge and ability, while Buck wished to see Clevenger fired on general principles. Buck's desires had been overruled.

Larry's first exploit on coming into the country—that of hanging the Indian sign on Nate Clevenger—would ordinarily have delighted Buck, and convinced him of the newcomer's true worth. But the good effect of this was for a time largely spoiled when Larry promptly went to work for the girl Buck Strachan wanted to marry.

Partly with the idea of protecting Virginia, partly to check up on the stranger

who guarded her sheep, Buck began a rather systematic spying on affairs at the Stirling ranch, being gratified to learn that Larry went about his business in a highly efficient manner. Buck was open-minded enough to assume that Larry could not help falling in love with Virginia—just as he himself had done.

He was jealous of Larry, of course, but his jealousy did not make him blind to the good points his rival possessed. In a vague sort of way Buck would have resented it if Larry had remained cold to Virginia's many charms, as if that constituted an affront to her and a reflection on his own good taste and judgment.

The cattlemen had voted a truce toward Virginia, although this kindness did not extend to other sheep raisers, most of whom were drifting out of the country. This favoritism shown Virginia was due to the fact that she had suffered a heavy loss, contrary to the pledge made by John Lindsley and carried to her by young Strachan.

Larry Wilson, however brave and efficient his guardianship, could never have held the fort alone against the combined cattle interests. Virginia, however, ignorant of all this, made the not unnatural mistake of attributing her success solely to him.

One afternoon Buck, while cutting through the rough lava country on the extreme southern edge of Virginia's property, noted a man ahead, and, strangely enough, the man was not mounted, a highly unusual situation in a region where horses were the universal means of transportation. Buck's suspicions were aroused, and he spurred his mount forward, eager to learn the identity of this stray prowler.

But the man had unaccountably vanished, and although Buck covered the immediate locality with thoroughness, the stranger did not again appear. He seemed to have been swallowed, as it were, by the very earth.

"Funny he could give me the slip so easy," the young rancher ruminated. "I don't like the looks of this—much. What's anybody doing around this God-forsaken place, ducking out of sight like a skulking coyote! It wasn't Wilson, that's one sure thing."

Buck was loath to give up his search, and continued scouting industriously. He failed to find the mysterious stranger, but

he did make a rather interesting discovery—the opening of what appeared to be a considerable cave in the lava formation. The entrance, while of fair size, was not at all conspicuous, and might easily have gone overlooked. It was sheer chance that led Buck to the find. He sat on his pony, silently regarding the hole in the rocks with appraising eyes.

"Good place for a mountain lion or a silver-tip grizzly to nest up," he mused. "But right now I'm venturing the opinion that the only animal in there walks on two legs, instead of four. I wonder would it be a wise stunt to go in, and smoke him out with a little gunpowder."

Buck Strachan was no coward, yet he hesitated at thought of entering the dark cave after the unknown man.

"He'd pot me sure," he thought. "Not much to gain and a lot to lose. I know where his den is, anyway. That's something." Thereupon he left.

The thought of this prowler bothered Buck, and the following morning he rode for the Bar Y Bar, determined to warn Virginia. Buck knew that the cattle interests were not back of whatever deviltry might be afoot, so he was guilty of no disloyalty to his father's associates. Also, he had no desire that his rival should get all the credit for breaking up any underhanded work planned at Virginia's expense. He still grudged Larry his luck in being on the spot to save the girl from the two desperadoes who attacked her that morning on the range.

No evidence of life appeared about the Bar Y Bar as Buck approached. He entered the house—and was confronted with the same scene of disorder that has already been described. A cigarette butt, carelessly tossed on a small table, had burned a hole in the embroidered cover. Buck swore savagely as he grasped the significance of this wreckage of Virginia's neat housekeeping.

"I sure ought to have come around yesterday after spotting that cuss," he mourned. "Too late now. But where in hell is that Wilson? Seems like he might have busted up this play. But likely he wasn't here; in town, mebbey."

"Now I got my chance. Wonder if the skunk has taken Virginia to that cave. It's the first place to look, anyway." And within five seconds Buck was mounted, heading swiftly for that section of Virginia's ranch where in ancient geologic times the pent-up

energy deep within the earth had found relief.

Leaving his mount hidden in a group of huge boulders, Buck slipped warily up to the mouth of the cavern. From a cleft in the jutting lava, high above the entrance, there spurted a sudden puff of smoke. Buck felt a sharp blow on the right shoulder, although he experienced no pain, and was surprised to find himself falling to the ground.

"Gosh, I'm shot!" he grunted in stupid bewilderment, but retained sufficient mental alertness to roll over within the shelter of a rock as he fell. For an instant he lay there, taking stock of his injury. His right arm was helpless.

"Shoulder broken, likely," he muttered. "Wouldn't that jar your slats—just when I need all I got! Wonder if that *hombre's* still on the job."

He thrust the brim of his hat around the edge of the rock, and in prompt response there came the muffled crack of a gun, with the sharp whine of lead that splattered off the hard surface.

"He's there, all right," was Buck's grim mental comment. "Now I got to retreat to a point where I can get a crack at him. This here location's too hot for comfort if a guy's anyways fussy."

Half crawling, cruelly handicapped by his wound, Buck cautiously worked a passage back from the place of greatest danger; fortunately numerous rock fragments of all sizes provided abundant cover. Finally he reached a position which satisfied him, and again Buck used his hat in an attempt to draw the enemy's fire. No shot responded.

"Either he's wise I'm tricking him, or he don't know I moved," the wounded man decided. "Now, if I can sling a few bullets into that porthole he's using, might be they'd carom off the rock and mess him up some. Leastways, he can't be doing Virginia harm while I got him occupied. I don't want him to find how danged near helpless I am."

By careful scrutiny Buck located the crack in the lava cliff from which the shots had come.

"Must be an upstairs to that cave, looks like," he mused. Even as he was about to shoot, another spurt of smoke appeared, and a bullet glanced off the boulder close to Buck's head. His shift of ground had at last been detected.

"Never touched me!" he yelled triumphantly, and then, using his left hand, Buck sent a stream of bullets into the fortress of his opponent.

"That 'll give you something to think over," he grunted, pausing to reload his six-shooter—a difficult task, with one arm nearly useless.

XI

SHORTLY after this the rescue party, headed by Larry Wilson, established contact with the besieger. Explanations quickly followed, and a hasty attention was given to Buck's wound. As such injuries go, it was not necessarily serious, although he would be kept almost helpless for some weeks to come.

"We'll get you home or to town later," Larry told him. "First thing is to finish the job you started."

"Too bad I ain't worth much," Buck said regretfully. "I'm about as much use as a fifth wheel on a wagon."

A council of war followed, interrupted by Larry with:

"You fellows keep up a fire on the rocks while I rush the cave. Ain't that a good idea?"

"Don't you do it, old-timer," Buck protested. "That guy is too blamed handy with his side arm. He'd pick you off sure."

"Art Dooling is in that cave," Woodford added, "and he's one of the best revolver shots I've ever seen. No one could make the cave under his fire."

"But we got to do something," Larry persisted. "Virginia Stirling can't be left in there with that miserable polecat."

"I told you I wanted to help her," Woodford said quietly, "and now I'm going to prove it. There's another opening to the cave, known only to me. Dooling has no idea of it. Around to the left, a hundred yards or so, is a big clump of buffalo berries. In the heart of the brush tangle is an old burrow, probably made originally by coyotes. It has been sufficiently enlarged so that a man can force his way in. That burrow leads to the cave."

"I'm on my way," Larry announced.

"Wait!" Woodford commanded. "The cave, of course, is dark; you'll find the central chamber an exception, for quite a bit of daylight filters in through cracks in the lava walls. I imagine Dooling has left Virginia there, safely tied, while he climbed

up to the place from which he's been shooting. If you take your time and go quietly, you have a chance of surprising him. Otherwise—" He broke off, significantly.

"I get you," Larry replied. "Now I'll sneak back so he can't see me leave. Then he won't be expecting visitors from another direction."

Buck Strachan reached up his left arm to grasp Larry's hand.

"I wish I was you, old hoss," he said wistfully. A glance of mutual understanding passed between the two men. "Take care of yourself," Strachan went on. "Good luck to you!"

"Thanks!" was Larry's brief response—and he was gone.

He located the patch of buffalo berries without trouble, forcing his way into the spiny tangle of interlacing brush. For a while he was unsuccessful in finding the burrow, but presently he struck a fairly open trail, broken by some one who had come through previously, and following this, Larry arrived at the hidden entrance. It did not appear especially inviting.

"Guess I can squeeze through if Woodford can," he mused.

The thought of possible treachery occurred to him, only to be instantly dismissed. Woodford must know that his game was played out, and any belated attempt to hamper Virginia's rescuers would be sure to make matters worse for him in the final settlement.

Furthermore, Larry believed that the man was sincere when asserting that he wished to help in Virginia's escape from Dooling's slimy clutches. Without hesitation Larry wriggled his way, head first, into the narrow opening.

As it dipped below the surface the burrow enlarged slightly, a circumstance for which the explorer was profoundly thankful. He had to progress by feeling only, for naturally the tunnel was as black as pitch.

"I'm expressing the fervent hope that no rattlers are holed up in this trench," Larry thought. "Side-winders don't bother me out in the open, but one would sure be a cause of embarrassment down here."

For some distance the excavation slanted downward rather steeply, then continued on a level, large enough for Larry to proceed on hands and knees, instead of on his belly, snake fashion. The material through which it penetrated abruptly changed from earth to partly disintegrated rock, as Larry

could tell from contact with his invisible surroundings.

Slowly he progressed, moving with an extreme of caution, lest some carelessly dislodged fragment of rock give warning of his approach. He had only the slightest idea of the distance traversed, but finally began to think that he must be approaching the main portion of the cave. The muffled pop of a revolver, just ahead and above him, gave startling proof of this.

"Those fellows outside are keeping the skunk busy," was his gratified thought. "Now if I don't fall down on my part of the program, we'll soon have him where the hair grows short."

Larry moved forward, inches at a time. The darkness was now not quite so intense. He rounded a turn, to find his way blocked by several large stones, apparently fallen from the roof of the cavern. Stray beams of light penetrated between these boulders, changing the darkness of the passage into a sort of twilight dusk.

"Woodford didn't say anything about the place being closed up," he meditated. "I reckon they's a way; all I got to do is find it."

Near the far edge of the passage, close to the bottom, Larry presently located the outlet which he sought—a low archway beneath one of the larger boulders. Gun in hand, he deliberately shoved himself forward under the huge overhanging rock.

Larry's head emerged into a roomy chamber, which, as Woodford had stated, received daylight through a number of cracks, as well as from the main opening. Another shot, fifteen or twenty feet above him, warned him against carelessness. Before he was half through the hidden opening, Larry's eager eyes were glancing about the chamber in search of Virginia.

At once he saw her, lying on the floor of the cave, hands lashed behind her back. The girl's eyes were closed, but even as Larry watched, they opened. She recognized him, Larry perceived, and for an instant he was afraid she might betray his presence by an involuntary exclamation. But Virginia Stirling was not so lacking in self-control as that, merely nodding her understanding as he placed a finger to his lips.

With redoubled caution, Larry inched himself out from under the boulder arch. Suddenly he saw Virginia's eyes open wide in terror, her face growing pale.

"Dooling's coming down from his perch!" was the thought which flashed through his brain. "Mebby he's seen me."

For one breathless second his helpless body cringed, anticipating the expected bullet. Then, with a last desperate heave, Larry pulled his legs clear of their cramped quarters, rolling over and over on the floor of the cavern, as he caught indistinct glimpses of a man crouched in the rocks above, peering down, revolver in hand.

The cave roared to the flash of Dooling's gun, but, thanks to Larry's quick-witted strategy, the bullet thudded harmlessly into the loose earth that formed the cavern bottom. Even the most accomplished small arms artists have their bad moments. This one was fatal to Dooling.

Close on his shot came Larry's, the cow-puncher firing upward from his prostrate position. That bullet did not miss.

Dooling's gun slipped from his grasp, clattering down the rocks on which he perched. With a strangled cry the outlaw followed, pitching headlong, dead even before his body plunged sickeningly to the floor of the cave.

Ed Bates came bursting in as Larry bent over Virginia, cutting the thongs which bound her. That final episode had been too much for the girl's demoralized system; she had fainted, with the crash of those last shots echoing in her tortured brain.

Tenderly Larry carried her outside, deriving a strangely wonderful satisfaction from feeling her slim body pressed close to his. He bore his unconscious burden to the sheltered spot where Buck Strachan lay.

"Where's Woodford?" Larry demanded, glancing about. Virginia's worthy uncle had vanished. He explained briefly to Buck why he was interested in Timothy Woodford.

"You ought 've told me that," Buck said. "I thought he was with you. I'd 'a' bent my gun on him when he started to fade away, if I'd known."

Larry found himself apathetic, on the whole, regarding the escape. Buck read much in his attitude, cordially agreeing when the other said:

"It don't matter if he did give us the slip. He can go, as far as I'm concerned. He may have played a rotten hand, but at the finish he dealt the cards straight, like he promised. Mebby that will offset a little of the rotten portion. Main thing is we got Virginia safe."

Virginia recovered quickly, maintaining that she was none the worse for her recent harrowing experiences. There was a moment of embarrassment when she realized that she was in the presence of both Buck and Larry. Then Virginia noted that Buck was hurt, and instantly began fussing over him, vastly relieved to learn that he was not so badly wounded after all.

Her delight that Larry and Buck were on friendly terms was obvious. Yet there was a certain restraint in the glances which she gave them in turn.

Bates had lingered behind, and he now reappeared with a heavy leather bag.

"Here's the Placerville gold," he told them. "Dooling was the thief. The road's not far from here, and it's plain that he's been using the cave as headquarters."

By common consent, nothing was said by the men to give Virginia the slightest hint that Woodford was involved in the stage robbery.

"We ought to get old Buck into bed," Larry presently observed. "The Strachan ranch's only four miles from here. I'll ride over there and get a wagon with a mattress to take him home on. Meanwhile one of the boys can hit the trail to town for old Doc Thurston."

Virginia rewarded him with a smile for this suggestion.

"That's fine, Larry," she said. "I've been worrying over how we'd get poor Buck home."

After Larry's departure, Virginia was quiet for a time. Buck broke the silence.

"You like Larry Wilson pretty well, don't you, Virginia?" There was a shrewd, yet troubled, look in his eyes.

Virginia smiled, a little tremulously. That awful instant, when Larry lay under the threat of Dooling's gun, loomed big before her. She shuddered at the thought of what might easily have happened then. Even now Virginia could not understand how he had escaped.

"Do you like him better now than you did before, Buck?" she inquired by way of answer.

Ed Bates hereupon coughed apologetically, feeling himself just a bit out of it. The conversation assuredly was assuming too personal a trend properly to be overheard by an outsider.

"If you folks will excuse me, I'll take a look inside that cave," he suggested. "Curious sort of place."

No one urged the gentleman not to go, and accordingly Mr. Bates went. Thoughtfully he kicked at the loose, crumbled rock, a sort of decayed hardpan which seemed to form the bottom of the main chamber.

"Blue clay," he muttered to himself. "Blue clay as sure as I'm a foot high."

Bates took from his pocket a small tobacco pouch—the identical one which had been in the possession of Mr. Timothy Woodford until the night of the holdup at the Cowboy's Home. He opened the pouch, shaking out into the palm of his hand a dozen or so of small irregular objects. These Bates regarded pensively.

"They grow in the blue clay," was his mental judgment. "There's the fortune Woodford was shooting at in his blind selfishness—and missed."

After a decent interval Bates emerged from the cave, returning to the two others.

"Miss Stirling," he began, a smile playing on his lips, "I have the great pleasure to inform you that you are the owner of a diamond mine."

"A diamond mine!" Virginia gasped in unbelief.

Bates dropped the small bits of mineral he had been holding into the girl's hand.

"There are the first products of your mine; that is, the first you will receive. I imagine your—er—estimable—uncle got away with quite a number of others in the past. These were taken from him—in somewhat irregular fashion—at my order, when suspicion had been directed toward him on quite another matter."

Virginia compared the modest stone in a ring she wore with the small objects Bates had given her.

"But they don't look like diamonds," she protested.

"Diamonds have to be cut before they are used as jewelry," he explained. "That makes it possible for the diamond to show the world its hidden beauty. Those in your hand, after cutting, should be worth several thousand dollars, depending on their color and perfection. You are going to be a very rich young woman, Miss Stirling. My heartiest congratulations!"

The concluding paragraphs of her brother's tragic diary flashed across Virginia's mind. At last she understood.

It was late when Larry and Virginia returned from the Strachan ranch, where Buck had been transported in the wagon secured by Larry. Doc Thurston had made

light of the wound, although Buck had been slightly feverish following the discomforts of his jolting ride. Only when the patient finally dropped off to sleep did Virginia and Larry go back to the Bar Y Bar.

"Tired, Miss Virginia?" he asked, as their horses swung in at the home ranch.

"Yes, Larry," she rejoined with a little sigh. "I am tired; tired of squabbles and fighting, and all that goes with it."

Larry looked at her hungrily. In spite of the drawn expression on her face, the lines of physical and mental weariness, she had never seemed more beautiful in his eyes, never more to be desired. Words burned on his lips, but somehow Larry, brave and fearless although he was, had not the courage to utter them.

"Speak up, you fool!" he savagely flayed himself. "You can't do any more than lose."

But the words stubbornly refused to come.

Silently they dismounted from their horses, Virginia turning toward the house.

"Will you come and take dinner with me this evening, Mr. Wilson?" she asked formally, a roguish light dancing in her eyes. Larry grinned, entering into the spirit of the occasion.

"Now that's real nice of you, Miss Stirling," he retorted. "I accept your kind invitation with much pleasure. And about what time might you expect me?"

"In about an hour, I imagine. Old Rosita must be somewhere around the place, and I'll tell her to speed things up. I know you're nearly starved, Mr. Wilson." And with another mocking smile Virginia slipped away.

Thoughtfully Larry went to his own quarters, where he shaved and made himself as presentable as his rather limited wardrobe permitted, hugely delighted at the prospect of dining in state with his fair employer, and tickled at the air of formality she had been pleased to throw over the affair.

His simple preparations concluded, Larry sat on a bench in front of the deserted bunk house—relic of the older days—smoking a cigarette and pensively watching the slow, majestic progress of a glorious full moon that appeared above the rugged lava country.

At length he pinched out his cigarette and went up toward the house. Rosita, the old Mexican woman, was bustling around,

and greeted him with a broad grin of understanding. All signs of the disorder caused by Virginia's forced departure had been removed.

While Larry hesitated, uncertain as to just what move etiquette demanded of him, Virginia appeared—but a far different Virginia than he had ever seen before. That brief hour had worked wonders in her appearance. Her face was no longer drawn and tired; the lines had disappeared as if by magic; and now her eyes flashed in a spirit of mischievous delight.

But it was Virginia's clothing that in particular drew a gasp of mingled awe and astonishment from the cow-puncher. In place of the riding suit of khaki which she usually wore—and which, indeed, was highly becoming to her—Virginia had blossomed forth in a gown of lacy gray silk, with silken stockings to match, and frivolous little high-heeled slippers on her dainty feet.

"Why, good evening, Mr. Wilson! I'm so glad you could come!" She smiled at him entrancingly, a bewitching dimple glowing in her cheek.

"Gosh!" Larry ejaculated feebly. "All dressed up and no place to go. Too bad there ain't a garden party some place!"

"How do you like me, Larry?" Virginia giggled, and she whirled about on one slim heel to give him a better look. "This dress is terribly out of date, but it was the best I could do. And a girl has to take some pains when she expects a gentleman to take dinner with her. How do you like me this way?"

"I don't dare say, Miss Virginia. My eyes are blinded from looking at you. If you stepped outdoors on a dark night, dressed like that, folks would sure mistake it for the sun a-coming up ahead of schedule. Why, you're just wonderful, Miss Virginia!" And Larry ceased, a little catch in his voice.

"Don't be foolish, Larry!" she protested, blushing at the outspoken words of praise and the frank admiration of his glance. Then Virginia added with naïve inconsistency: "It sounds nice, though. Such pretty things. Really, I didn't believe you knew how to talk to a girl. Say some more, Larry."

Larry Wilson made no reply, but he stepped forward, a certain resourcefulness about him that had hitherto been wholly lacking in his dealings with Virginia. She

eyed him, a bit doubtfully, smiling, a trace of color in each cheek.

Then, as Larry made a tremendous grab at her, she deftly eluded him, slipping from under his outstretched arm to the far side of the little table Rosita had set for their dinner.

"Why, Mr. Wilson!" Virginia cried tantalizingly. "Is that the proper way for a gentleman to act when he's invited out?" She made a beautiful picture in her fluttering silk gown, poised there beyond the little table, eyes dancing in merriment over his discomfiture. But Larry merely grinned, sure of himself.

Treacherously he began edging around the table, while Virginia in turn edged the other way, teasingly, provokingly, alluringly, that mischievous, mocking smile ever on her lips.

Larry stopped; Virginia also stopped. So, for an instant they faced each other across the narrow barrier, Larry's grin answering her smile.

His spurs jingled as Larry made a sudden unexpected sortie from the opposite direction. Virginia emitted a half scream of pretended terror—and then he had her, crushing her slim, graceful body to his in a swift passion of tenderness, which the girl resisted only for an instant. Reverently, Larry kissed her.

"I love you, Virginia," he whispered.

"I'm glad you do, Larry," was her softly murmured response. "I hoped you would. But, oh, Larry, you were so terribly slow coming to it!"

An apologetic cough sounded behind them, and old Rosita padded in. Side by side they sat at the table, while the Mexican woman, her kindly, wrinkled old face wreathed in delighted smiles, served them with the best her skilled fingers had been able to evoke from the ranch larder.

After awhile they went outside and sat together under the mellow glow of the friendly moon that shed its soft radiance over them and the rugged range country as if with a benediction. Virginia's head rested comfortably against Larry's broad shoulder.

"You won't have to herd sheep any more, Larry," she whispered; "or even associate with them. I'm going to put the Bar Y Bar back on a steer basis. I know you'd raise sheep if I asked you to, but I just couldn't be so mean."

His arm drew her yet closer.

"I'd feel a sight more natural wrangling dogies," he said, "even if it's likely to be a slow job getting started. I haven't so awful much cash saved up. A little, that's all. But with your sheep money we can begin on a small scale."

"We won't have to begin on a small scale, Larry," Virginia whispered. "You can go as far as you like—after a short time, that is."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you see, Larry"—Virginia hesitated over her confession—"it seems—I'm—to be rich." And haltingly she told him.

"Gosh!" Larry exclaimed. "I'm sure glad I didn't know it before, sweetheart. I'd never had the nerve to propose to you if I'd figured you were due to jump into the moneyed class."

"That's just what I was afraid of, Larry, dear," Virginia said softly. "So I took good pains to make you propose before you ever learned of it. Now you can't get away—even if you want to."

"But I don't want to," said Larry Wilson fondly.

And the wise old moon smiled down upon them—a glowing promise of happiness for the future and an end of strife and bitterness.

THE END

EVENING

In maples tall the thrushes call,
The sun is crimson in the west,
O'er pastures green and brooks between
The breezes croon of peace and rest.
A nodding rose that, hedge-bound, grows,
A buckwheat field as white as foam,
And through the gate, calm and sedate,
Full-uddered cattle, ambling home.

L. Mitchell Thornton

Her Excellency the Governor

HERE IS A STORY THAT SHOULD BE READ BY EVERY AMERICAN MAN WHO VOTED TO ENFRANCHISE WOMEN

By Clement Wood

EVERY FITE came breezily into the chief's unobtrusive headquarters in the Union Hotel, an insignificant structure in a lesser street of the city of Newton.

"Hello, chief—how's tricks?" the newcomer demanded. "Hello, Mr. Kelly—doctor—Mr. Elmore. Whole family, eh, except the Senator. How goes it? Everybody happy?"

Tom McKittrick, the chief, unbent a trifle from the taciturnity he had preserved so far in this conference. Fite was son of the big silk mill owner of Chester; some things had to be treated with respect. The chief's mouth twisted with ironic savagery when he tried to smile.

"How're they comin', down your way?" he retorted.

"Couldn't be better. You picked the best man in the State, chief. If anybody can beat Hodges, it's Mr. Sutherland. How'd he come out, that speech in East-lake to-day?"

The chief stiffened; his face washed suddenly grayer. He moistened his lips and clenched his hands.

"Dick Sutherland is—" he began, huskily. "He—"

A staccato thumping sounded down the illy-lit hallway outside, and stopped at the door; the door swung inward, and Senator Harley stood before them.

"Hullo," grunted the chief, whose face showed that he, at least, knew already the impending drama.

The Senator's countenance was pale, and his eyes were troubled. In his ungloved right hand he held a crumpled afternoon newspaper.

"He's dead," he mumbled in an awed voice. "Head of the ticket—"

Four of the others crowded beside him,

smoothing out the sheet, with its vast black headlines challenging the eye:

SUTHERLAND VICTIM OF HEART ATTACK

Candidate for Governor Expires After Noon Talk in Capital City

"Good Lord!" The national committeeman's tone was a startled gasp. "This—this is serious!"

The chief surveyed the Hon. J. Gordon Elmore, the resplendent political pride of Center City, with a disconcerting scrutiny. From some men he expected brains; from others a mental lieutenancy. It took both to win.

"An' just how?" McKittrick inquired acidly.

"Why, Mack—" Elmore hesitated a trifle. "Right before the election, and all—"

"An' all," repeated the chief without inflection. He looked around the half moon of faces slowly, appraising Fite's shocked enthusiasm, Elmore's ponderous amazement, the Senator's troubled perception, the shrewd bewilderment on the faces of Pat Kelly and Dr. Werts.

"This is October nint', an' in less than four weeks is the election," the chief continued. "Dick Sutherland could 'a' won. As well as I can figger, there ain't another man in the State can beat Hodges."

His mouth twisted again with a cynic's bitterness. No need to bluff here; if anybody could swing the State for the party, these five men could. They could take the truth straight.

His pudgy hand fell with listless enormousness on the desk's top; the hollow boom shuddered throughout the room. "An' this election—to have Hodges in again—against us—"

The faces before him went slowly blank. Biting experience had taught them that Hodges, the opposition candidate, was a political wonder worker; he had been Governor twice, the sole man on his ticket to squeeze in.

"This election," the Senator remarked with slow, keen penetration, "is to be followed by that damned factory bill."

"Yeah." The chief clamped his jaws together. "Where'll we be then, with Hodges in? Eh?"

"The boys is keen for that bill, Mack," Patrick Kelly announced bluntly. One of the five, he had been summoned by wire from his plumbing shop in Roydon. He was sound and safe enough, but he knew the latest thing the labor vote grumbled about, and he didn't hesitate to say so.

Dr. Werts, the sharp little country practitioner from Mountville, smiled a bitter negative to the labor sentiment on the factory bill. "Concentrate on the Legislature?" he half asked, half suggested.

"Yeah, we got to beat it." The chief framed his words more slowly. "Two terms we fought it off, eh? No, we can't carry the Legislature against it again. Your boys are for it, Pat; and the club women—Lord, we're dead there." He had tabulated it a painful score of times. "Both Houses are for it," he resumed suddenly. "But Sutherland's veto would have defeated the bill."

Fite broke in impetuously: "In his speeches he was for it."

Mack nodded with grim amiability. "He had to be. The platform was, too. An' now, gen'l'men, who'll we run?" In this murk, it would do no harm to let them share the load. "Yeah, this election, of all times, we gotter win." Then his words limped and stopped. "I don't see the man to do it."

Pat Kelly's nimble mind snapped to one of his intimates. "How about Pete Kerrigan—Lieutenant Governor. He's on the ticket awready."

Mack wagged his head in a decided negative. "Not in a million years. He'd get the union vote, but nothing else. An' how about the veto?" he added significantly. "Eh? He's really for the bill. And against Hodges?" He revised his figures sourly. "Not in ten million years."

Out of the pulsating pause, another name came; and, in slow and thoughtful succession, a dozen more—the best the party

had. No. Mack had considered each one. They would do anywhere but at the head of the ticket, yes; but here was Hodges ramping up and down the State—and there was no man to stop him.

Back each time, to the same dark deadlock, the conference came.

"Rensselaer—the old colonel—he wants it." Mack would not let one go unmentioned. "He's rich enough; no deficit in the campaign with him runnin'. No," a sudden energetic veto of his own suggestion. "We got to win. That's what we're here for. An' I don't see—"

Senator Harley had his back to the others, staring into the gray-streaked window and the dark outside. Without turning, he said simply: "I have the candidate who can win."

Four of the others stared, preferring finally to believe that their ears had tricked them. Mack shook his head without interest. "There ain't a man in the State can beat Hodges, I'm tellin' yer."

"Quite right." The Senator's cheerfulness, as he swung to face them, was almost juvenile. "Exactly. But I have a candidate who can."

The national committeeman snorted, ending with an embarrassed dive for his handkerchief.

Mack studied the dapper politician with a slight annoyance. "What you want us to run—the railroad, or a chain store?"

"No." Harley smiled with warm confidence; he lengthened the tense pause, then spoke simply:

"I nominate Betty Ward."

II

"Holy mackerel!" breathed Fite, eyes shining. "Old Ward's daughter-in-law!"

There was no other word, until Kelly, after a glance at the granite face of the leader, nodded in dogged agreement.

"She's a good sport," McKittrick said soberly. "Real lady—that's what I call her. But—" His hands fell tautly akimbo. "There is Papa Ward's cash for Guv'ner, an' Pete Kerrigan secon' on the ticket—an' it ain't Papa Ward's fault if Pete ain't in jail for leadin' the strike in the Ward mills, an' all."

The chief crooked a finger toward his silent and efficient secretary. That youth disappeared into the next room, and after the sound of repeated metal clicks, the grating of a heavy iron door, he was back

as swiftly, laying a plain white card in the chief's hand. The heavy grizzled head pored over it.

"Everybody in the State knows her." Senator Harley's eagerness arose to the surface. "Twenty thousand dollars a year—that's what she gives out to charity, every year. It's Pa Ward's money, of course. She's our national committeewoman, Mack. She's popular, and everything. She's always been regular in the organization, hasn't she?"

Mack lifted a noncommittal face from the card. "Reg'lar? Yeah." His mind weighed the suggestion from a dozen angles. "You heard her pull that bone, debatin' with Mrs. Ames, swearin' we was for low tariff—remember? An' once she voted the whole opposition ticket. Just let a woman get hold of a votin' machine— Yeah, it was the wrong lever; my checker spotted that."

"Oh, well, a mistake—" Harley's smile answered the other's fainter amusement.

Mack's voice grew singularly colorless. "The factory bill—she's for that. She lined up the clubwomen behind it—all of 'em. No night work for women; rest periods, forty-four hours a week for 'em."

"Well, after she's actually elected, she may change a bit." The Senator spoke now as a politician.

"She's a better man than her husband, isn't she?" The chief did not appear to be observing.

"Oh, George Ward is—he's a cold fish. He actually likes tinkering around the factory—regular bug on radio. If he ever voted in his life, he's forgotten it."

The Senator ceased as Mack's shrewd eyes fell speculatively upon him. Then the eyes turned away in slight uncertainty as he spoke part of his wonder aloud:

"Women in politics—that's a new stunt here. I mean—for her to be sittin' on the lid, Guv'ner an' all. I don't really know how much of a holt I got on her." His ideas trickled on.

"She's been careless." The voice was vague. "Too darned careless, I suppose." He tapped the card significantly. "I got some dope on her an'—an' somebody else. A man. In the party—" He built up his attack stingily.

Senator Harley looked out of the window; his face paled slightly. He saw it all as clearly as if he had suddenly turned time back a year, half a year.

The Chicago convention; the hilarious last night; the sweet, furtive taxi ride afterward, endlessly winding through cool parkways, and in sight of the moon glitter on the lake, with this woman beside him—this woman whose husband was uninterested in her and the things that were near to her soul.

That had been all—nothing to which any one could really object. Of course, it could be made to look—well, compromising at the least.

The chief did not appear to be watching him. "In Chicago," he enumerated listlessly, "an' again last March, right after the inauguration."

This swept over the Senator like a soft flood of remembered delight—the long, intimate talk in his Pullman compartment, no one else stirring—a talk the two of them had carefully ended before dawn. It was indiscreet, but nothing more. And yet, if it became headlined in newspapers throughout the State! What was Mack saying?

"Careless—I think that's all she was." He shook his head in baffled dissatisfaction. "If she was a man, now. Women in politics." Then he went on more certainly: "A woman's reputation is one thing, an' a man's is another. She was careless." His mind played with the idea. "That might be all we needed—in some cases."

Harley could hardly bring himself to speak, so tensely near did those sweet moments hover. A marvelous woman was Betty Ward, made for wife and lover, but with a husband shrunk into concern only for his factory and his radio.

No wonder she had stolen away from the tired hours to—well, play with him; that's what others would call it. Well, he had been straight—and she, too. Yet, in people's eyes—

Four of the men had sensed something menacing in the chief's blank tones. Harley knew at last that he must speak to make a diversion.

"But—in this particular case, Mack?" Somehow he kept his voice level. After all, there had been nothing really wrong.

"No." The chief spoke with slow decision. "The man involved—I can't use nothin' on him. No. I got nothin' on her that would do."

Harley sliced down to the bone; he knew the chief. "You're talking about her vetoing the factory bill if she's elected?"

Mack nodded, with speculating eyes.

"Mrs. Ward and Peter Kerrigan," the national committeeman repeated with the famed Elmore unctuousness. "What a combination! 'Politics makes strange bed-fellows.'" He achieved the platitude with profound satisfaction.

The Senator stared at the leader stiffly; both were strong enough to avoid even a smile. Then Mack shook his head slowly.

"She won't do," he announced. "We couldn't use her, unless we was sure of a veto. She—she might win," he grugged lamely.

Harley continued to stare at him. "She's our only chance, Mack."

The chief considered again. He shook his head.

After a pause, the Senator went on: "This stuff you've got on her—you can't touch that, chief?"

A grunt; then a corroborative: "No. Out o' the question. We can't use her."

"Mack," Harley weighed his words as if his future hung on each syllable, "I'll answer for this situation. I'll get you the dope—all you need. Then, if you want her to veto the bill, she'll have to do it."

"Mmph," grunted Mack, interested at last. "You sure?"

"You mean—" The national committeeman grasped a hint of the discussion's significance. "Some sort of a hold on her? Some sort of—of scandal? No!" he burst out with sudden vehemence. "We can't do that. You know, decent ideals, and all that. We mustn't mix up a woman's name. No! Why, you mean you'd catch her in a—dereliction, shall I say? I'm amazed at you, Senator. No! I couldn't stand for that." He bristled around at the others, self-importantly.

Fite bristled similarly. The doctor and the master plumber watched the chief's face.

It was the Senator whose smooth tones replied: "You misunderstand us, Gordon. We don't want to make her commit a crime."

"Why, then—"

"What do you—"

Harley's voice cut pleasantly through the confusion. "We merely want the evidence to point to a—a bit of innocent carelessness, shall I say? Let the whole thing be as pure as snow. What I propose to furnish is merely evidence of, let us say, this innocent carelessness. Eh, Mack? Then, rather than permit any shadow to

fall on her name, we would cancel the proposition entirely."

"You gotter be quick." The chief wagged his head up and down with vigor. "That fool Legislature may act at any time, an' once the bill is passed there must be a veto ready."

"Oh, I understand, Mack."

The chief's eyes bored suddenly through his follower's enthusiasm. "Why are you so keen on this, Harley?"

The Senator turned paler, but his smile stayed clear. "For a dozen good reasons. Because—" They came slowly. "Well, I don't want to see us lose. I don't want the factory act to go through. I like Mrs. Ward. I'd like to see her Governor. If this is the only way to put her over—this 'innocent carelessness' idea of mine—I'm for it."

The chief nodded grimly. His eyes were still curious.

Harley spoke more slowly. "And can't you see the final reason? Because it won't touch her, Mack. It's utterly safe. It can't possibly come out. You know how a man is—and a woman's twice as sensitive about her name. She'll veto, if you put it up to her this way—sensibly. I've got the very man, too, for the experiment."

His lips tightened with satisfaction, as he recalled certain favors he had done and promises he had received. "You've met Fred Knight, chief? He's campaign secretary for her, now. Wouldn't he put it over?"

The national committeeman looked more mystified than ever. Pat Kelly drank it all in.

"Yeah. Bright young man." And then the room hushed, as the chief swung away from them to stare thoughtfully into the darkness outside.

The face he turned back at last was rugged with decision.

"That's our ticket," he grinned in self-abasement. "An' the one thing I never thought of. She's the only person in the State, I guess, that can win. Oh, she'll walk away with Hodges."

He snapped abruptly to Fite: "Got your car? Run us down to Southville, so we can notify the lady right now."

III

FIFTEEN minutes beyond Southville, at the end of a new State road tunneling under the long arched avenue of golden maples,

lay the sprawly colonial farmhouse anciently named Elmford, where Betty Ward and her husband George now lived. What had been the river ford was now erased by a shapely bridge.

A gay tinkling of piano keys and glassware, under the gayer tinkling of human tones, saluted the six occupants of the Fite car when they stretched out of the cushioned seats, to stand upon the equally cushioned lawn sweeping up to the entrance of the house.

Harley invoked the sesame of the brass eagle knocker. The closed door opened, and the mistress of the house stood within to greet them.

"Well, Senator? Yes, I know Mr. McKittrick! How are you, Avery? Mr. Kelly— Oh, you must all come right in; just a few neighbors inside. You're just in time to hear the 'Symphony in Blue,' over George's latest radio set."

The chief rubbed his hands together nervously. He spoke hurriedly out of the corner of his mouth. "We gotter see her first, Senator."

She understood, and led them into the low beamed dining room, with its priceless antiques. Harley made way for McKittrick, whose few words told of the unexpected check in the party's plans, and the necessity for a last minute change in the line-up.

Betty's brown eyes sparkled under her browner hair. "And, of course, as national committeewoman, I have to be consulted. How thrilling! Politics is the most fascinating game in the world."

She was not quite in key yet with the men, Harley noted. With women, he knew, half of her power came from a cultivated archness about politics, which they regarded as smart—and something of this still clung to her. At this moment she turned to him, her eyes throbbing a message even more cordial than the warm friendliness of her tones.

"Of course it 'll have to be you, Senator," she declared. "I often tell him, Mr. McKittrick, that he's the best dressed man in our great State. Every woman I know will vote for him."

"But you see, Mrs. Ward, he already is Senator." The chief got along heavily. "He's gotter stay in Washington—"

Her mind still fluttered a bit, Harley detected with his unusual sensitiveness.

She was speaking to the chief. "Then

you'll run, of course! It must be wonderful to be political boss of a State."

"It ain't." McKittrick heavily eased himself into a chair. "I got no more final say than a street cleaner. All of us—politicians, doctors, lawyers—a State wouldn't be nothin' if they was all. Who d'you s'pose pays them, an' all of us? It's your husband's father—an' old man Fite—the mills an' factories—the men that own 'em. That's what makes every cent this State lives on—or any State. So, when it comes to sayin' what to do, I don't count."

The national committeewoman shook herself gracefully together. There were some things in politics that were unconvincing; she had met them before.

And she must forget, she told herself, her unsettling tiff with George, lasting all the afternoon—because he wouldn't attend her meeting to-morrow night, right here in Southville.

She stared more keenly at the chief. "But you won't run Father Ward or Mr. Fite; I know that."

"Not quite," smiled the Senator.

"Not ever." The chief's tones were more vinegary. "You mustn't expect voters to know nothin', like we do."

"And the factory owners?" Her gaze was guileless. "Aren't all of them in favor of the factory law, Mr. McKittrick?"

He eyed her carefully; he had not underrated her intelligence. "No, ma'am. They ain't. We got the one candidate who can sweep the State against Hodges. We come for your approval, ma'am."

"Oh, I approve of beating Hodges. There it is—the 'Symphony' beginning—" at a noise from the loud speaker in the room beyond. Her words tripped out eagerly, as her interest was tugged in two directions. George would expect her to come into the radio room. "Who is it to be?" Her bright eyes glanced from face to face.

"It's you, ma'am."

The chief's sigh of relief at getting this far startled her again, and she made a charming little chirrup of protest. "Me? I? Why, you must be joking, Mr. Mack!" She slipped without intention into the nickname which she reserved for his absence. "For Governor?"

"That's the dope." His intent face softened it awkwardly. "Yes, ma'am, the idea exactly."

All the feminine in her spoke first.

"Why, I—I haven't a single thing I could wear! I couldn't consider it."

"Election isn't for a month," Harley soothed her. "Inauguration a month later."

She steadied into an odd dignity. "I—I must tell my husband. George!" She flashed to the inner door, calling him out to her. "You know the Senator, and everybody. What do you think? I'm to be elected Governor!"

"Fine!" George Ward beamed. He might have been praising a neighbor's child who had won a prize for Sunday school attendance. "Come on in, quick—I had distance, Betty, just before this awful racket commenced. Lord, there's static again!" He waddled intently out of sight.

She half started to follow him. No, he had gone away full of his own pursuits, with no need of her. She half shivered, then smiled in unnecessary self-defense.

McKittrick's tone sought to patch up the strain he sensed. "Then you'll accept?"

Her face was serene now; even the mask of archness had vanished entirely.

"I think I've been hoping for this chance. Let me see." She studied the chief with cool earnestness. "My platform—of course it includes the factory laws."

"And everything the party stands for," Harley prompted.

"Conference here at ten to-morrow morning," announced the chief, now that irritations had been brushed away. "The whole State committee 'll be on the job—I'll get 'em here."

"I know just the dress I need for the inauguration," Betty cooed back into femininity. "A duck of a frock. Can't you really stay? That's right, Senator; you stay. I'll see the rest of you to-morrow, then?" She paused, doubtfully, seeming to oscillate between two political selves. "I oughtn't to make a speech of acceptance now, ought I?"

"We'll have that in Newton, Friday." The chief was cautious. "You might be talkin' it over with the Senator. Good night, ma'am."

The others returned to the cushioned seats of the car, whose two bright eyes peered down the road it must go.

"A woman in politics," Mack volunteered, as the lights of Southville wavered past, "acts like a danged fool, an' generally has twice the horse sense of a man." He coolly looked past the national committee-

man. "Eh, Pat?" he demanded of the plumber.

"She's a good sport—I always said that," Kelly repeated in satisfaction. "O' course, before I'd see my ol' woman runnin' for office, I'd crown her with a Stillson wrench!"

"It 'll be a new game, politics, when they mix in." There was an undercurrent of bewilderment in the chief's voice. "A duck of a frock, eh? Good Lord! An' she twice the man Sutherland 'd 'a' been. New tricks, new tricks. Well"—he settled back more easily—"Harley'll have to deliver the goods."

When they reached Newton, the others were glad to disappear into strange quarters in the hotels; Kelly at the Union, where the chief had his office, and the others in more expensive hosteleries.

But McKittrick's working day was not nearly over. One by one the principal newspapers were called up; messages were sent to the other committeemen throughout the State; buttons were pushed that evoked a flood of demands for Betty Ward from every part of the commonwealth.

The morning papers decorously chronicled the dread visit of death, and gave more space to the absorbing question of Sutherland's successor. The opposition papers jubilated over the certainty of Hodges's election.

The party press mentioned half a dozen imposing names who were sure to win gubernatorial honors if selected—names respectable enough to grace a conjectural ticket, but mere straws in the Hodges hurricane. Lastly, these papers emphasized, pressure was being brought to bear on Mrs. George Ward, the national committeewoman, the distinguished philanthropist and publicist. Her answer was expected hourly.

At the meeting the next morning, Betty Ward gratefully accepted Senator Harley's suggestion that Fred Knight be her chief aid during the campaign. Other suggestions she considered with her eyes wide open, and followed most of them.

Knight became invaluable at once, and the candidate drew support even better than the chief had guessed. Modern man, and woman, too, for all the solidity of inherent conservatism, leaps at a change—especially a change respectably sponsored.

A woman for Governor! Well, why not? What had Hodges done, anyway? Or any other Governor, recently? Here was the

zest of a novelty. "Try anything once." This was the dominant attitude at once, and then the opposition sappers and miners got busy.

IV

BETTY WARD swung into the campaign like a star performer. She could speak; she had been used often for seconding the nominations of temporary convention chairmen, and other essential trifles.

Audiences took to her; she had a bed-rock sincerity, whether in her shrewd blows for the factory act, which she understood, or her equally severe strokes for matters about which she was largely ignorant. In both cases she was close to the popular mind.

Always Fred Knight stood at her elbow, advising, fending off obstacles. And always her hearers recalled the twenty thousand dollars that she distributed annually in charity; the woman, the mother in politics; the liberal leader of the new women; earnest sponsorship of reform legislation. "Oh, give her a chance; she can't be any worse than the others have been." That was the talk.

Hodges, at best, had been a popular failure, with no mates on the winning ticket, and the Legislature twice against him. Betty Ward looked like a popular success.

The chief felt the ground swell. He called Senator Harley in, a week before the end. "Got that dope yet?"

The Senator's eyes clouded. "Not yet, but I have everything coming right, chief."

"She's goin' in, ain't she? Unless I'm a bigger fool than I think, she's in."

"Looks good."

"No slip-up, an' don't forget. I gotter have that stuff to use the moment the Legislature meets—or we'll be in a hell of a fix."

"You'll get it." But the Senator's face was troubled as he left.

McKittrick did not miss a single political trick, for all his confidence in the result. The campaign fund would go a long way; there were many things beyond that to take care of.

It was the last week of the campaign. Betty Ward whirled from meeting to meeting, where her impassioned appeals for better working conditions for men and women rang like the words of another Joan of Arc.

Election day itself arrived. Desperate last minute attempts were made to get all

the available votes to the polls; watchers' eyes were tense for any trickery from their opponents' side.

Election night boomed in. Betty queued it over the ticker in Newton headquarters. Fred Knight, as always, hovered at her side, like a buffer, an extra hand, an extra brain. During off hours of the campaign he had eased the going by plunking ridiculous ditties on his ukulele, while his warm barytone drawled out the comforting, absurd words.

His niceness had grown on her, especially when George put his foot down, wedded himself to his factory, his radio, his lake-side cabin at Elmford, and refused to attend a single political meeting. With Senator Harley shuttling between Washington and the local battleground, perpetually hurrying for a train, she had come to lean on Fred Knight.

For even the furor of the campaign left her lonely, and the secretary was not only an invaluable aid, but something more flatteringly personal than the most efficient secretary could be expected to be. This final night, however, he was all efficiency—a wall between her and the shattering turmoil of the crowd.

She even had time to withdraw into memories of the quiet *camaraderie* that the month had given the two of them. Heavens, there was no harm; and no one could possibly conjecture any.

The chief was everywhere at the same time in this critical moment. When the tired telephone girl stumbled out with a scrawled message for the candidate, he was there to relieve her of it, solicitously. Into an empty room he went, to run swift glances over the message.

"By God!" he whispered, his eyes dilating strangely. "We got her!"

He called Harley in, whose face gloated tautly. The message was from Mrs. Hanby, the candidate's woman companion at the Newton Hotel; called home by her husband's illness.

"See, hmm?" There was an undercurrent of hissing in the chief's voice. "Git that man Knight, an' have him come here, quick."

With a heavy heart, Harley did it. Oh, in the long run it would all help her!

Fred Knight soon was back at the candidate's side; she had hardly missed his brief defection.

The returns came ticking in from every

human hive in the State. Hodges was running well; way ahead of his ticket.

Betty Ward was running well; running better. The returns went seesawing back and forth, as reliable strongholds sent in their verdicts. Hodges now was a trifle ahead, but the big personal districts of McKittrick and two or three other local bosses were still unheard from.

Then there came a final cataract of majorities that lifted her figure almost to that of Hodges, then beside it, then shoved it a safe couple of thousand votes ahead.

Her Excellency the Governor! It had really happened, after all!

Then came the impromptu reception, with its endless handshaking with people she was sure she had never met, and never wanted to see again. Her eyes began to swim, her tone of gayety became forced, and at length almost cracked.

Midnight arrived and passed. Fred Knight sensed her utter strain, and whispered that he would take her back to her hotel. He steadied his lips as he helped her into the taxi; his own pulses fluttered now.

She drowsed back against the cushions, her mind disintegrated into whirling fragments of consciousness. She hardly realized that, following Fred's word, the taxi buzzed through the park, then made a long circle toward the country, to give her a little fresh air.

The hotel was reached at last. The two walked through the lobby, in its midnight disorder, with rugs and chairs piled against the walls, with queer, almost human figures pushing damp mops along the tile work underfoot. It had been an important day, she remembered drowsily. Something had happened, she hardly remembered what.

"Oh, come on up," she insisted shakily. "Mrs. Hanby will be waiting for me."

She was in her room at last. "Shh!" she cautioned, pointing to the bedroom just beyond the little sitting room. "She's gone to bed, or fallen asleep. We needn't wake her. Oh, sit around for a few minutes; it's all right."

"I really ought to go." He did it well, his confidence restored.

"Don't be silly. A chaperone practically in the room."

She eased back in her chair, as he talked—chiefly about himself, his own struggles, his aims. With a sense of gratefulness, she realized that he was taking her mind off

herself. His voice purred comfortably on and he had the uke, too—he had left it here. His fingers softly framed strange soothing chords as he talked. What he had been, what he hoped to do, and, then, what the term as Governor might mean to her and to the State.

Part of the time she must have drowsed. Then she aroused herself into a sharp, unnatural wakefulness, as an insinuating knock sounded on the door.

Fred Knight's mouth hung open like a fish's; the haunting Hawaiian thing jangled off midway into silence.

He was at the door, the door was open, three men had come into the room. Betty Ward was too utterly tired to add things together. She remembered that she knew the men—Boss Mack, and that funny little fellow Kelly, the Hon. J. Gordon Elmore. It was like a jumbled dream, all of it.

The chief was speaking, his eyes straight on her. "If you could tell us where Knight— Oh, here you are! You've got to wire in the final report. We looked everywhere for you."

It was all a blur to her.

The chief was holding out a square of folded paper. "Here's a phone message for you, Guv'nor. It came after you left—"

She read it, then read it again. Something went chilly in her chest. "But—Mrs. Hanby is here." She tightened control of herself, an intuition of something wrong sweeping over her. Her thoughts fumbled. "This must be a mistake. She's in the next room."

The chief looked stupid. "She ain't there," he insisted.

Betty glanced inside the curtained alcove. She was smiling tensely now. "This looks bad for the new Governor, chief. The joke's certainly on me. I'm glad only my friends know." She stopped, fighting against that internal shiver. Then, loyal in spite of the feeling: "I insisted that Mr. Knight stay a moment."

"Yeah," agreed the chief.

Her mind worked with terrible clarity. What in the world was she to do? This feeling was absurd—these men were her friends, her backers, her political creators. Never in the world would they tell.

No, she told herself desperately, despite the running tide of dark suspicion, it must be all right. Anything she might say would merely put them on their guard; would

look as if she felt that there had been something wrong.

Her laugh, when it came, was gay. "No, not a word, Mr. Knight. We were so sure she was right here, I absolutely forbade him to leave."

V

THEY were gone at last. She sat in the light, staring at an inner darkness.

The days went by; nothing came of the strange interruption. Everything conspired to make the Governor-elect sure that her moment's panic had been foolish. There must be honor among politicians; these were her friends, her party. Logically, she convinced herself there was not one ground for worry.

She tested each part of the story: Mrs. Hanby had left the message, she had had to go home; and, of course, Betty Ward herself had insisted upon the rest of it. There had been an unaccountable delay. Oh, but she was an utter fool to worry!

And, all the time, that terrible leaning toward hidden truth that woman has, and man largely lacks—that strange sense called intuition—told her that nothing but trouble could come of the thing.

She even had a full affidavit made out and signed by Fred Knight, detailing every moment's happening that night: all she had said and done, especially about Mrs. Hanby's being in the next room. Yet she could have sworn, having no knowledge, that Tom McKittrick had a copy of the affidavit.

A month after election, Governor Elizabeth Ward took the oath, and entered upon her prescribed duties. Worry, somehow, had poisoned her liking of Fred Knight, since that mix-up. She had asked for another secretary, and selected a middle-aged woman, efficient, impersonal.

Now that she was the Governor, her hours were filled with a thousand minor irks. Her hand was threatened with writer's cramp, from endless miles and miles of mere signatures to this and that trifle.

The Legislature—her Legislature—had little of her time. Indeed, her insistence on the side of the factory bills was hardly needed. The sessions were tumultuous; the old guards of both parties threw every obstacle in the way of consideration of the measures.

But the State was alive, and its new blood was speaking through the young ma-

jority; the bills were pushed through reading after reading, to the tense night of passage. Party lines now broke utterly, and the new mood rode iron-heeled over the remnants of the old.

Decisive majorities in both Houses favored the measures, and, after two days, the ornately engraved bill was laid on the Governor's desk, needing only her signature to make it the law of the commonwealth.

For eight weeks she had not seen Tom McKittrick, except for a mere passing nod. Half an hour after the bill reached her desk, the secretary ushered him in.

"I gotter congratulate you," he came out with weighty friendliness. "Mrs. Ward, you done well. So far, that is. I—I thought I'd—just drop around." He fumbled for a start.

With a shrewdness growing hourly upon her, she waited.

"That bill," he pointed vaguely toward it. "Factory act, eh? How d'you feel about that, Guv'ner?"

"I'm for it, of course." She leaned back confidently in the swivel chair. If she could only puff a large black cigar—her mind embroidered the scene—she would be like some of the great political figures of American history.

"Yeah—for the idea." His assent sounded cordial. "For a real workable factory bill, y' understand—forty-four hours, an' all. Not for that mess," again pointing negligently toward it.

"It's splendid—this bill—I think it will—" Her tone ended uncertainly.

"Pretty fair, Guv'ner. Middlin' truck, we know. I s'pose you'll have to veto it, an' insist on a water-tight law. You gotter watch yer step, eh?"

She stared at him, chill as frosted steel.

His eyes somehow still met hers. "They're talkin' a bit, I hear—the Hodges crowd. 'Bout that mix-up election night, with your young feller Knight. C'lectin' affidavies, I hear. Maybe you're right; maybe you oughter veto the bill, after all." His tone was quiet, but his gesture held her dumb. "Think it over; an'"—it was a command, now, heavy browsed—"no interviews or nothin' to nobody, eh? Jus' sit steady. Y' understand?"

She looked up, startled. Of course she stood for party regularity, and all that. Apparently, political bosses had to be humored a bit.

"Why, yes, Mr. Mack," she compro-

mised, "if you want me to—I won't talk, in advance. I'll think it over, too. Of course"—a bright digression—"I might change my mind. I'm a woman, remember that."

His stare was another disconcerting command. "I getcher," almost jocularly. "I think you're right. You can sign some better bill next time."

Then he was gone. She stared, mainly inward at herself. Surely they need not worry at such vague talk from the Hodges crowd; the party was strong enough to beat back any opposition now.

If that was all? The premonition of disaster always edged somehow back into the picture.

The newspapers, in the interval, behaved oddly. Most of them had favored the bill, tepidly at least; now they altered to an excited speculation as to whether she would sign or not. Leading legal minds picked interminable flaws in the wording of the measure; it was "understood from reliable sources" that she would not sign a faulty bill. The former friends of the factory law seemed to have vanished from the newspapers entirely.

Four nights later the chief was back. "Decided to veto?" he inquired sharply.

"Indeed not," she replied, just as incisively. "I said at the beginning I would sign."

"Just a moment." His tone was deferential; she had once heard a judge pronounce sentence in the same tone. "We all stand for a decent factory act. That bill is tripe. You seen Judge Torrington massacre it in the *Age*? You seen the *Citizen* editorials? You gotter veto it."

"Mr. McKittrick, I'm for this bill."

He shook his head negligently. "An' you're goin' to veto it. Get me? An' why?" The chief disliked fighting under the table. He pulled a bundle of legal looking papers from an inner pocket, and thumped them down on the arm of his chair. "Copies of affidavies from seven people who worked in the hotel, all about your comin' in after one o'clock, election night, an' stayin' there till daybreak with that Knight. More than that," with complete, self-detachment, "they say—the Hodges bunch—they'll put Kelly, an' Elmore, an' me on the stand. They can't get far with us; I don't see how they even knew."

He swung back toward her. "Perjury's

a serious thing, Guv'nor. I'd do more than that for you or the party, but"—he tapped the papers impressively—"here's their real dope. People 'll believe this. It 'll bust the party wide open." An inane remark of Elmore's came to his lips. "'Politics make strange bedfellows.'"

"B-but—I don't understand." She was sparring for time.

"I'm afraid you do." His lips bent downward at the tips. "Guv'nor, you're a woman—a married woman—an' you understand. That gang's against the factory bills, an' you, too. We gotter knuckle under, now, all because o' this mix-up."

He spoke so convincingly that he almost believed his own story. "They gave me these affidavy carbons; if you'll veto, now, I give you my word I can kill off the story—positively. They're talkin' impeachment an' mentionin' divorce."

He stopped, to let this sink in. Shakily she held out Fred Knight's affidavit to him. "This answers it."

His eyes shot through it. "Tripe," he sneered. "Worse than their stuff. You was with him, wasn't yer? What more do they need? It's an outrage, of course"—she sensed his was a good attempt to fume—"but what are we to do? Eh?"

"Sign the bill," she replied. Her lips were firm at last.

His great fist thudded down on the table. "By God, no! An' have you impeached—disgraced—divorced? Bust up the party? Spoil all we done this year? Put a crimp in women holdin' office? Knock us outer the ring, for ten years at least? I won't stand by an' see no man or woman do that. No! You'll veto."

She arose tremblingly to her feet. "My d-duty—"

He came at her, towering above her, hands open like claws.

"Ain't you a member of the party?" he growled. "An' on the national committee? I don't have to talk about these affidavies. Now that you give 'em this dope, fiddlin' around all night, is that all you can say? How can you sign that bill?"

The silence grew dreadful.

"Before God, I—I don't know how you can, Guv'nor." His passion almost convinced her emotions.

He swung away and strode around the room. Once his foot kicked the baseboard punishingly.

"It 'll leave us O. K. if you veto," Mc-

Kittrick went on. "You'll still demand a decent law, see? All Judge Torrington said will back you up. You ain't a crook; you won't turn against your own party, in a mess like this. We didn't get you into it."

"You got till Tuesday," he pointed out as he quieted down. "I'll drop by again, that night, in time. We can't have impeachment—divorce—disgrace."

Troubled friendliness was in his eyes now. "I'm sorry for us all, Guv'nor. But we ain't gointer double cross the party. See you Tuesday."

VI

AFTER the feeling of faintness passed, Betty Ward called her secretary in. She gave curt directions embracing the rest of the week; she must run away for a few days' rest. Yes, she told herself unsmilingly, run away. Governor Ward was going to run away.

How could she face that terrible situation? How could any woman face it? Its least result would be to wreck the party machinery. It was all her fault, after all.

And then a great voice suddenly sang in her soul: No! Not her fault—her carelessness, at most. It was hardly even that. But the Hodges group had the dope.

Her eyes hardened. Did they have it? Or had Chief Mack himself pretended? It was hard to think it through.

And what of Senator Harley? Could she get help from him? No; he had hinted the same thing, she pieced together. At least, he had said he would veto the bill if he had the chance she had.

Maybe George, her husband, could help: good old George. She breezed in at Elmford, famished for supper, living on her nerves. She would forget the whole dreadful mess until the next day.

Then, all night, she tossed in sleeplessness, her rest shattered by the pressure of the threat that hung over her.

At the breakfast table she tried George out. She explained that the person in difficulty was a friend of hers, a woman in Newton. This woman hadn't really done a thing. Should a man divorce a woman in such a case?

George Ward beamed affectionately at her, unstirred.

"Any man would, I suppose," he ruled. "Modern women are messing around in all sorts of trouble. Thank God, Betty, you've got a level head."

"By the way"—he was off on his hobby, briskly—"I got the Coast last night, after you went to bed—I'm sure it was the Coast. With those new batteries I'll get Europe next."

So—disgrace, impeachment, divorce! Were these to be the end of her road? And the party, in its hour of victory, was it to be broken and disgraced?

The swirl of life at Elmford tossed her about enough to tire her, but not to win her mind from the bleak quandary.

Tuesday was her last day. She went back to Eastlake. Her every action that day was mechanical and numbed. With the darkness, Tom McKittrick would come. Could one human being stand alone against all this?

She stood before him, when he was ushered in, more dreadfully emptied of courage than she had ever yet been—emptied of all but a dreadful fright, a shrinking horror at the casual trap into which she had blundered. Among men politicians, she had heard, such things happened. But that this cruelty should happen to her! It was an utter disgrace that no woman should be made to face.

He waited for her to speak this time. Without her knowing it, as she stood fronting all the dark power he represented, the color washed slowly back into her drained cheeks.

"Yes, you've got me, Mr. Mack," she said slowly.

"Yeah?" His face was rigid. "Nothin' but a veto left."

Her tongue found words somehow. "I'm not even sure the other bunch worked this thing out. For all I know, those affidavits are just your trump cards."

"Don't pull the baby act," the chief said, chidingly. "They got you caught, see? An' us, too. It's the veto—or smash for the party. An', for you otherwise it's somethin' not pretty, eh? Yeah, it's the veto. You jus' gimme your word, an' I'll go now."

"I will give you my word." She could hardly hear herself speaking. These words, she knew, were never the words she had intended to utter. Yet the voice which she knew must be hers continued:

"Mr. McKittrick, I got along, somehow, before I was Governor—before I was married—"

"Oh, sure, you'll get along awright," he interrupted. She must be thoroughly

hooked by now, he reassured himself anxiously, hopefully.

"I've been a fool—a darned fool," Betty Ward continued. "You're right. A fool has no business to be Governor. But, fool or not," there was a new serenity on her face as the depths of her being took control, "you said, that last time, something that I never was, am not now, and couldn't be."

The sudden puzzled hush in his face strengthened her.

"Yeah?" His tone was a bully's. "What was that?"

"A crook! I'm not a crook. You said it yourself, Mr. Mack." There was almost hysteria in her voice now. "I couldn't be a crook—to my own party—to save my soul from a living hell."

He cupped his ear with his hand, to catch the blurred words. "Yeah, that's right," he remarked, as if reassured. "I knew you'd be sensible. You'll stand by us, Guv'ner."

"By my party," she corrected quietly now; "the party that elected me—the decent men and women of the State—the working men and women and children I was fighting for."

"That's a lot of soft soap for the public, Guv'ner. Talk—"

"I am speaking. To be a crook is not a woman's job. Now you go ahead;" a sudden fury drove her on now; "let them do what they want—and you, too. Let them give that dope to the newspapers, and start the impeachment any moment you want."

"Mr. McKittrick"—she faced him like an image of wrath—"I sign that factory bill to-night."

VII

HAGGARD of eyes, veins bulging, he stared at her incredulously.

"Ruin yourself, Guv'ner? Smash the party? I won't let you hurt the organization. I'll—"

"You know"—like a knife her words sliced through his pretense—"you know I haven't done anything wrong. The people are fools, I know, but they're getting more sense every day. There'll be a lot who will believe the worst you say about me, but there'll be a lot who won't believe you."

Her face was an avenging fury.

"After I sign that bill, what can you do? That'll save me. What is anything I do, personally wrong, compared to doing a

thing like that, that's publicly right? There are enough people with brains in this State, I believe, to save me from all the scandal-mongers' impeachments.

"Anyhow," her head lifted higher, "there are enough to let me keep my respect, no matter what happens. But, even if I stood alone, I'd face everything, rather than—than betray the people I—" Something choked her at last.

The chief could hardly believe what he thoroughly knew to be a fact. "You—you're goin' to sign the bill? You ain't a goin' to veto? Why, Guv'ner—"

"That's all." Her breath had come back.

He was too wise to misread her. When he spoke, it was a vacant mumble to himself. "I still got the courts on my side."

Her eyes went wide with comprehension. "So!" Her voice leaped in triumph. "Why, you won't even use that silly story, Mr. McKittrick! Your game was penny poker; you merely meant it to frighten me. But I called your bluff." She could hardly keep down a laugh of relief.

He was on his feet, his heavy body swaying backward and forward. "I've broke men for less than you done."

"Break away." There was a hysteric tide rising now. "Write me down twice a fool, if you want to; but the women of to-day—of to-morrow—are much too much for you antiquated political bosses."

"Miss Armand, show Mr. McKittrick out, please. Take your papers!"

She bundled up the affidavits, and held them out evenly to him.

He stared at her, ignoring the woman secretary at his elbow. Oh, he'd suspected it, from the very start—women in politics—in office—new problems. The courts, now: he might be able to do something there.

Suddenly he hated himself for his political impotence. Things were changing right over his head, and he had stood still.

One savage crisscross with his hands attacked the papers and they were torn across the middle. He let the fragments dribble into the wastebasket.

"Good ev'nin', Guv'ner, you win," he said, genially.

As he backed out, he stared at Betty Ward, marveling at her height. He knew that the State's chief executive was not a tall woman, but he had just been able to look up to her.

Lightly Is the Word

MARY CAVENDISH HAD BEAUTY AND BRAINS AND CULTURE,
BUT THESE ARE WEAK WEAPONS AGAINST A
MAN'S SELFISHNESS

By Mella Russell McCallum

IT was only natural that Mary Cavendish should hail an ally in Gage Holden. He was different from the men of Joan Farley's crowd. His interested blue eyes held the static sparkle of a spectator, rather than the agonized gleam of an "expressor."

Mary shared an apartment with Joan for economic reasons, and they got along well. Joan was a wonderful person, who had burst through a shell of peasantry and landed on a New York newspaper, and was writing a book, and doing all the things for herself that a Cavendish had done generations ago.

But Joan's fierce little playmates, who wrote and painted and suffered—well, taken *en masse*, they were rather awful. You see, a Cavendish never did things in *italics*. The Cavendish ferocity had spent itself on such early American enterprises as building red schoolhouses and inventing bathrooms.

Holden had come down to the office of the Seamen's Foundation, where Mary did things with card indexes, to see about a contribution, and the superintendent had introduced them. Mary could tell, by the way he took her all in without seeming to, that he was what she called a real person. His glance rested on her frankly, and—Mary knew—with approval. For Mary was not only lovely in a pastelle sort of way, but she knew how to dress, and then, once dressed, how to forget all about it. The girl next to Mary whispered that Holden was a swell, so much so that he didn't bother being one.

After that he found it convenient to drop in at the Foundation rather often; in fact, it appeared to become his favorite charity. They chatted frequently, and one

day he asked her to dine with him at the Centurion Club. And the Centurion Club—well, it wasn't like Joan's Bohemians, with a minor poet sitting on the piano, and a single-taxer blithely mixing cocktails in the bathroom.

They talked about the things one does talk about at a first dinner, the way Broadway was torn up, the intelligent telephone service, the theater, books. Gage Holden confessed to a liking for the *belles lettres* type of literature. His blue eyes crinkled with humorous apology, and he squared his shoulders for onslaught.

"I know, you aren't on the intellectual map nowadays unless you're ballyhooing for garbage in print," he said.

"There are maps and maps," she conceded. She had been having realism forced down her throat in large doses lately. "Still, I'm not sorry Victoria is dead."

That seemed to please him, and he chuckled.

"Some one has to do the pioneering," she went on. "I hate pioneering, myself—but I'm perfectly willing to share in the more pleasant spoils."

"Of course you hate pioneering," he stated emphatically. "You did yours generations ago, Miss Cavendish." Had the superintendent told him she was a Massachusetts Cavendish? she asked herself. "Let the other fellow do it now," he continued blandly.

He was mixing oil and vinegar expertly as he spoke. She liked his long fingers.

"That sounds awfully hard," she mused. "But, as a matter of fact, I'd be no good as a pioneer, anyway. I haven't the originality. I can only appreciate."

His face lighted with quick pleasure.

"By George, I believe I've at last met some one who gets things straight."

All through the dinner she thought how much he was like the men of her family, like them—plus. She wasn't just sure what the plus was, except that it had to do with money. The Cavendishes had never had money. The Cavendish men at thirty-five—Gage Holden must be about that—were apt to be a little frayed out from classroom and court room and laboratory labors.

Gage Holden had not only their well-bred charm, but a certain quality of eternal fitness that comes from wealth. Just to look at him fixing salad made her feel a little sorry for her lawyer and professor brothers who had families to support.

Joan Farley squealed ecstatically when she learned that Mary had dined with him.

"Why, my dear, he owns a mint!" Joan had a peasant's awe of money which went queerly with her radical contempt for it.

"He's only moderately wealthy," said Mary, from the wisdom of the card index.

"Any one who doesn't have to work is rich," declared Joan.

Mary and Joan could never quite understand each other, but each knew the other was good for her. For Mary radiated culture—a hateful expression of Joan's—which Joan resented outwardly and grabbed for inwardly. And Joan pulled Mary straightway off her shelf of Cavendish self-satisfaction.

For instance, each Cavendish girl, on being graduated from college, had a year abroad. The family managed it somehow, by terrific scrimping. It was as necessary as beefsteak. Joan couldn't get it.

"My brothers are well-to-do farmers," she told Mary once; "but they wouldn't spend anything on European trips. But you bet I'm going to go some time." And Mary's heart had ached at the girl's vindictive bitterness.

Nor had Joan been able to see why Mary had spent her own money for cream-colored paint, and covered the ugly bedroom walls by her own labor. Joan didn't like those ugly walls—but Mary couldn't stand them.

They invited Holden to the apartment, and he came, and, surprisingly, he liked Joan. "I feel useless around so much concentrated ambition," he told Mary afterward. "She's one of the wheels that make the old ball go."

But he didn't care much for Joan's friends. They amused him, but they bored

him more. Art and science direct from the producer were a bit too thick for him.

So he and Mary fell into the habit of going about to the theater and opera together, and he suggested that when they wanted to chat they make use of his apartment. "Victoria is dead, you know," he reminded her.

She smiled and accepted.

It was like Holden to have an apartment with just one servant, instead of a house. He knew how not to complicate comfort. The rooms were uncluttered, almost austere, with long, gloomy areas occasionally shot with something rich and brilliant—a vase so blue that it hurt, a rug more moving, more replete with pain and pleasure, than poetry. Mary knew it was not the work of an interior decorator. She commented on that.

"Yes, it's my own taste, and rather haphazard," he admitted. "The only effect I like is comfort. And clashing of color or form is as uncomfortable as drafts and slivery floors." Mary could understand that. "I buy what pleases me without worrying about the effect. Then, if there's something here that doesn't go with it, I pitch it out."

"When I brought home that picture over there"—he pointed to a very blue seascape—"I had to do away with a Florentine street scene in browns and reds. I was rather fond of it, too. But I wanted the blue more."

Mary was slightly shocked. "That must be how you've kept your spaces so clear. Not many have the courage to discard beauty. That's why so many people have their rooms looking like art shops."

He smiled, and drew a chair for her near the open fire. "Selection is my only art, Miss Cavendish."

"And do you carry out that scheme in life, too? Do you pitch out old, unsuitable friendships?"

"H-m. There's an idea. Let's talk about it." He lighted her cigarette, and sat down opposite with his own. "I think perhaps I do. One can't keep everything."

"But friends," began Mary, rather helplessly. "Isn't that cruel?"

"I don't think so. A friendship lasts really only so long as the parties to it are benefited. It's sad and silly to hang on to an empty shell."

"But some friendships last forever, Mr. Holden."

"Do they? I'll admit I have some which have lasted—so far. But *forever* is a reckless word. I wouldn't dare prophesy. And, after all, what if a friendship does break up, you surely keep what you have gained, you keep that much of your friend forever."

"Then your idea is that we're the product of our absorptions, and that what we actually get is more important than the friendship itself."

"I'm not moralist enough to say, Miss Cavendish. Offhand, I should say that what we get is the friendship. My friend may die—as far as I am concerned—but what he's given me lives on."

"That's very interesting," Mary said. "Do you apply it to women, too?"

"Why not?" He smiled. "Haven't you seen a boy pick up a liberal education from a series of girl affairs? Ambition—culture—even altruism, sometimes. He keeps those things and forgets the girls—if he can."

Mary retailed the conversation afterward to Joan. "By golly, he's right," Joan said. "I tell you, you've got to be hard in this world." Joan had that morning sent her sister a check to be used for certain refinements known to the mothers of small babies, which her sister's husband considered unnecessary.

"You're lucky," Joan went on. "Gage Holden would never want me for a friend."

"Nor you him," retorted Mary. "For he doesn't do things."

All winter Mary Cavendish saw Gage Holden at pleasant intervals. And then it was spring, and he invited her and Joan to come down to his Long Island place for a week-end.

Joan was delighted to go. She forgot to be contemptuous of wealth, and talked about his estate. Mary said it was just a house and yard the same as any one had. But it did prove to be a little more than that.

It was a restored farmhouse of great beauty and comfort, and Holden's sister, a rather caustic widow, stayed there. She chaperoned the party. Joan hated her at sight, and Mary noted with sinking heart that Holden's sister never once got the real Joan. The other guests drew Joan out for their own amusement. And Joan not only didn't play bridge, but said that she never intended to.

Sunday afternoon they couldn't find

Joan anywhere. At last Holden whispered to Mary that she was down at the garden-er's, sewing a little fancy frock for one of the gardener's children. Mary went with him to bring Joan back to reason.

"You're a very naughty child," Mary scolded.

"I belong down there. I understand Mrs. McGinnis, and she understands me. I'm going to send her a copy of my book. Don't drag me back to the manor house. I hate this feudal idea of not being able to mix with the gardener."

"Feudal fiddlesticks," said Mary.

"Let her alone," Holden advised. "Come on, Joan, let's go for a fast ride on the motor parkway."

Joan's eyes sparkled. But Mary declined to go. She was grateful to him for extricating Joan from her naughtiness. Poor Joan. Why did ambitious people have to make things so extremely hard for themselves?

After that Joan conformed, even to the extent of letting old Captain Baker teach her bridge.

But if the week-end marked a step in the education of Joan Farley, it also marked a turning point in Mary's friendship with Holden. He kissed her. The others were all indoors, and cocktails were under way, and the talk was general, and nobody missed them, and it wouldn't have mattered if they had.

Mary had known that he would kiss her sometime. To tell the truth, she wanted him to. She had had a number of love affairs, and enjoyed them. So why shouldn't she want to be made love to a little by this man whom she liked so thoroughly?

In their way, the Cavendishes were realists. Their god was taste, not prudishness. Mary had seen her sisters go through their romances, marry their men, and then—go on enjoying life with their husbands and children. They got the wine out of the cup, and, without thinking much about it, Mary expected to do the same thing.

Of course, Joan Farley claimed that she would never marry—and maybe she wouldn't. But Mary had no career engulfing her like an ocean. Doing pleasant, intricate things with a card index hardly appeals as a life work.

Just before Gage Holden kissed her she prayed a little Cavendish prayer. "Lord, let me be not too complaisant." She had confidence that her prayer would be an-

swered, not by God Himself, but by her own god of taste. And it was.

She knew she had only to make a sign, and he would kiss her again. But she did not. They went back to the house with their fingers lightly interlaced.

And that was all. But, in the bustle of going back to town that night, there was a current between Mary and Holden that sometimes stretched to tenuous thought, and sometimes, when they were near each other, doubled on itself with an electric impact.

II

MARY CAVENDISH liked Gage Holden because he was like the men of her family—plus. She thought the plus was money, and it was; but it was more than that, and that was where she made her mistake. The whole thing was, she didn't know her man, and she didn't know that she didn't know him. She knew she was in for it now, but she did not care, for what could it mean but marriage?

There were excursions in Gage Holden's speed boat that summer to make bearable the hot New York evenings. There were dinners with appetizing green things predominating, and cold beer. Mary had some pretty summer clothes, thin green and white things. Holden told her she understood the art of looking fit better than any woman he had ever known.

"A woman should never be intense in summer," he said. "She should just slip through, skim things, comfortably and coolly. I wish you didn't have to work this hot weather." He frowned. Mary thought that he was wishing he had asked her to marry him before summer began.

"It isn't so hot down at the office," she said lightly. She met his close look with a smile, and let her eyes pass beyond his. She was so happy that she had to keep loosening these small, close contacts, lest life become too breathless.

She thought, "I suppose we shall be married in the fall or winter." The whole affair had been so finely spun, so deliciously graded, that it would not be like him to blurt out a proposal. Gage Holden never did things crudely.

August was fairly cool, but with September, summer heat came surging back in leaden waves. Joan Farley was up-State, visiting her family. Mary could hear Joan pouring out accounts of New York life:

"And Mary, you ought to know Mary, she's so wonderful and balanced and cool—but not really cold, you know—and she wears the loveliest cool-looking clothes. And she's having a thrilling affair with a man about town"—Mary did wish Joan wouldn't call him that—"and he has a mint of money, and when they're married I bet they'll live in Paris or somewhere." Mary could just hear Joan going on.

Holden's apartment was being cleaned, and they spent the hot evenings at Mary's, which was a quiet place now with Joan gone, and not so hot, either, if you left the bathroom door open and got all the breeze. Mary made cool things to drink, and served them in green glasses.

"What's your idea of love?" he asked her one evening. "I know you're not romantic, so just tell me what do you think about it?"

Mary considered unsteadily. "Well, it has to come first through liking. And by that I don't mean just intellect, for I loathe some men whose minds I admire."

"Taste," he summed up for her. "What a good little materialist you are. Now, if I got egg spots on my coat—"

"But you wouldn't get egg spots."

He laughed and reached for her hand.

"Well, go on."

"Well, after I was convinced that a man lived the way I like life to be lived, then I'd have to like his mind, not agree with him, but at least understand what he was getting at."

"I see. An equal."

"Not necessarily. I think I'd rather like a superior."

He laughed again. "Physical attraction, what about that?"

"It's important—but I'd never marry for it."

He did not reply. There was a sharp silence. She heard her own voice say again, "Never marry for it." A fleeting foreboding touched her. Holden leaned forward and kissed her.

In later years Mary knew that the act was the perfection of technique. For it was entirely natural in essence, and its perfection lay in the timing of it, just then. For if he had said what he said next before he kissed her, life would have fallen into another pattern. But he kissed her first, and she adored it, and nothing else mattered.

"I shall never marry," he said presently.

"I don't know that it's necessary to tell you. But, again, I don't know that it isn't necessary. So you may as well know it." And he smiled so frankly, so engagingly, and with such complete honesty, that she couldn't help admiring him for it.

"Does it matter?" he asked lightly.

"I don't know," she said, simply. For, you see, she didn't know. The Cavendish girls always married their men, or else turned them down.

"Well, it rests with you if we keep on being friends. I'd like to, Mary."

"You're honest, at least."

"Damn it, a man's got to be with you."

It was a remark which would flatter any woman.

He stayed only a few minutes after that, and he would not have kissed her again, had not she, in the sudden, dumb sense of desolation that possessed her, turned toward him. For there are times when sympathy is so necessary that one finds comfort at the source of grief.

And so he kissed her and went away, and she sat alone in the little living room. She said, "Well!" and "Well!" again, and laughed a little.

He was certainly honest—and fair. You see, she did not think then about his kissing her before he told her where he stood. The significance of that didn't come for a long time.

Well, it was an interesting business, to say the least—and exciting. Oh, she was excited, all right. She knew herself well enough to realize that she was perilously near being in love. She liked him. And the thrill of his kiss lay alive in her blood.

She sat up nearly all night thinking about it. Should she "end all," as it was called? That would be the safest course. Yet, wasn't she rather borrowing trouble? Taking things entirely too seriously? Did you have to cut the nicest man you knew just because he didn't want to marry you?

The thing didn't look so big in the morning. After her bath and her breakfast she decided that she had magnified whatever danger there might be. He had certainly never professed to love her, and until a man began babbling about love there wasn't much point in getting excited about the future, was there? She thought not.

It was true, as Holden had said, that Mary wasn't romantic, for she had no set notions about higher and lower natures. She had studied her biology without

squirming. But she did not know that there are people in the world who never say the word *love* at all.

She was shrewd enough to know that the next move must come from her. Four days later she called him up, and he asked her to dinner. And things went on very much the way they had been going.

Then Joan Farley came back, and the apartment was noisy again, and so when they wanted to be quiet they went to Holden's apartment. Indeed, nothing was in the least changed, except in Mary's mind. For where she had been hazily sure of a marriage proposal in time, she now had a fact as solid as a brick: there wasn't going to be a proposal, not ever.

She set about adjusting herself to this phase of modern life. She called it modern, and that was where she fell down again, for nonmarrying men are as old as history. Only, you see, in books they are called something else.

She was exhilarated by her own daring in going on with this friendship. "I am educating myself," she said. "I am doing what no Cavendish woman has ever done, carrying on an interesting friendship with no thought of marriage."

Not that she intended to renounce marriage. Oh, no! But there was no hurry about it. The cool, impersonal card indexes at the Foundation suited her for the time being.

She didn't blame Holden in the least for wanting to preserve his bachelor serenity. And yet, she wondered how it was that a man of thirty-five did not feel that human urge for home and family. She decided that she would ask him. She would put aside that fetish known as proper pride, and just ask him.

It was November, now, and they were sitting by his fire. The gloomy beauty of the long room had stolen over her senses, pleasing them.

"How did you arrive at your conclusion never to get married?" she asked easily.

"Marriage doesn't strike me as a permanent and holy state."

"Perhaps not. But what else is there? The most justified liaison in the world can never take the place of that public symbol, a home."

"Isn't the home just a symbol? What about the people under its contract? Are they static? The law of the universe is change. You change. I change. I change

my mind about this room. Just now I'm off blues."

Mary glanced around. The beautiful seascape was gone. In its place hung a queer, hard, Moorish yellow thing. Mary felt a pang of sadness.

"It's good for one to have to conform and adjust," flared Mary. "And then, there's the idea of home—I love my family. You'd like them, too, Gage. They're your kind—real persons. My brothers haven't suffered from domestic bonds. Of course we're poor, that's the only difference."

"Look at Marge," he said emphatically. Marge was the sister who had chaperoned the house party. "She was a delightful girl till marriage got her. Now she's acid. And my other sister is just the opposite, and just as impossible. She is all curves, self-abnegation, husband this and husband that, no separate entity. It's all right, if that's what people want, but I propose to remain as I am. It can't hurt any one for me not to marry, can it?"

"No, not unless some woman falls too hard for you, and gets hurt."

"Well, if any woman is foolish enough to do that, I advise her to let me alone."

He had got up, and was taking a bottle from a wall cupboard. He was proud of his wines. Now he poured out two glasses of yellow liquid, and gave one to Mary. Lifting his own, he smiled in gay, unspoken toast.

Mary drank a little more than she generally did at a first sip. A quick courage flared through her.

"What's your feeling for me, Gage?"

"I like you enormously. You knew that, didn't you?"

She finished her glass, smiled unsteadily, and felt tears coming to her eyes.

"Good Lord!" he said quickly. "I haven't said anything to hurt you, have I, Mary?"

"No. I'm—a little tired, and the wine—I drank it too fast. I'm all right now."

"That's good."

She went home soon after that. Thank God, she hadn't let herself in for a scene! He would hate a scene, she was sure.

He liked her enormously. She liked that word *enormously*. She told herself that it was far more original than as if he had said he loved her. And meant quite as much, too, probably. You see, Mary was learning, in a way.

Mary's mother had told her to bring a

friend home with her at Christmas. Joan was going to her own home, so she asked Holden, and at first he accepted. Then, at the last moment, he said that business wouldn't allow him to leave town just then. He asked her to spend her last evening with him.

She knew he was lying. But she didn't mind. He had a right to do as he pleased. She resolved to make this last meeting of the year a pleasant occasion.

Dinner went off well, at his club. Then he took her home with him to look at some prints he was enthusiastic about. She was enthusiastic about them, too. But all the time she was saying a little prayer inside: "Lord, let me not be serious."

She did not take any wine, for alcohol did queer things to the tongue. When it was time for her to go, she let him take her in his arms and kiss her, after which he said: "I'm sorry not to meet your family. I know I'd like them."

"Some other time," she said aloud, and to herself: "O Lord, keep me!"

"You're beautiful to-night, Mary."

O Lord, desert me not now. And the lord of the Cavendishes, which was the god of taste, stayed by her. And they went down into the crisp, cold street serenely.

The evening had been a success. But Mary was glad when he left her, and she could slip out from under the strain of it.

During her vacation the family questioned her about Holden, and not all the questions were spoken. She had written freely about him all summer, but lately not so much. They knew she had expected to bring him with her.

"We're the best of friends," she explained, and a worried look crossed the face of her oldest sister, the one whose husband taught history. The unmarried sister, who was a Wellesley junior, grinned.

"Say, Mary," said the Wellesley junior, "are you going to tell mother you've got a lover?"

"Really, Anne, you're impossible." Mary's cheeks flushed. "I blush for you."

"For me?" said Anne.

It was only a little sisterly touch-and-go, she told herself. Families were naturally curious, and their teasing got on one's nerves sometimes. Families were pretty terrible in a way; Gage Holden was right. There was a standard, and no matter how you varied from it, in essence, still you had to conform.

Yet, Anne's remark did bother her. For she was thinking a great deal too much about Holden. His kisses stung through the moment, and lay in her blood, and stung again. It was all very well to say nonsense—nonsense to yourself—but just where did she stand, anyway?

On her way back to New York, lying in her berth, she faced herself straightly. She had always had the feeling that a Pullman berth would be an ideal place for self-confession, for there were no familiar walls to remind one of folly on the morrow. It was just an impersonal cell of plush and linen, where you were safe in dragging out skeletons. And in the morning a black man would scuttle things about—and the scene of your self-betrayal would be gone.

Lying flat and relaxed and receptive, she let the tides roll in.

"Oh, my God!" whispered Mary Cavendish, and turned to the smother of the pillow.

III

SHE would not see him again, she decided. Not ever. That would be the safe way.

At first it wasn't so hard, for there was an agreeable flutter of accumulated work at the Foundation. And it was occupying to compare vacation notes with Joan.

Then the sight of a telephone began to torment her. It would be so easy, so easy. Her desk pulled her to write a note. Even the Foundation stationery held just one possibility.

She ached to confide in Joan. She could tell Joan things. But she was afraid of what Joan might say. For Joan might bark: "Well, I'd let him go to hell," but again, Joan might give reckless advice, and talk about the value of all human experience. Joan was strong for all human experience—in other people.

Mary called up Gage Holden so many times in imagination that she was not surprised when, three weeks later, she heard herself giving his number.

That day she moved about like a floating thing. The torments were all gone.

Here were the suave napery and silver of the Centurion Club. The man opposite was faintly reproachful, faintly amused, detached, attentive.

Holden confessed to a desire for another cup of coffee when they were outside, and Mary offered to make it for him. Joan was out for the evening.

He praised the flavor of the coffee, and they sat together on the davenport which was Joan's bed. Mary told him about her vacation, and he talked of a play which he would have enjoyed seeing with her. Then they fell silent, fingers lightly interlaced.

Suddenly Mary turned her head and hid her face against his shoulder.

"Tired?" he asked.

"No. Just glad to see you."

"Well, you took your time about calling me up."

"Yes. I know I did. And if you knew the reason—I expect you wouldn't like it."

"Then don't tell me," he laughed.

Something in Mary flashed. How could he sit there, her hand in his, and say such a thing? It was monstrous, somehow, after all her self-searching and suffering. She forgot her little prayer.

"Gage, my dear, I'm afraid we don't understand each other very well."

"Why not?"

"I don't know—things—things mean a lot to me." The words were quite steady, but the breath afterward was perilously near a sob.

He looked at her sharply, and frowned. Then he gave her a little shake. "Where does Joan keep her stuff? I'm going to fix you a drink."

While he was rummaging in the cupboard, Mary had time to think of her little prayer. O Lord, let me not be serious! What a silly supplication that was. As if it mattered whether you got serious or not. As if anything mattered except the truth.

She took the drink he offered, and that gave her a kind of plaintive strength. "Gage, tell me—you manage things so well—how can I keep from—from caring—too much?"

"I'm afraid you aren't in a mood to take advice."

"Yes, Gage, I am. I want to learn. I do, truly."

"Well, the only way to regard a friendship is—not to regard it heavily. Friendship is a trick boat, Mary. Weight it down with bonds and responsibilities, and over it goes. But if you put in it only the present moment, then it will never capsize with you. Good Lord, I sound like a poet, don't I?"

Mary sat very still, a humble disciple.

"Lightly is the word, Mary. The minute friendship gets intense, then you're done for."

"I see," she said. "I—I guess I haven't had as much experience as you have. But I do see, and—it sounds reasonable."

"Of course it's reasonable. No one on earth is worth agonizing over. But there's much delight to be had in life, if you don't get off the key."

"Yes. I understand."

"You feel better after that drink, don't you? That's good. I'm going, now. Uh—you might drop me a line to-morrow."

"I will, Gage. You've—you've cleared things up for me."

IV

WE shall skim lightly—Gage Holden's word—over the last chapter of Mary's friendship. It is a very short chapter, anyway. For she couldn't play the game the way he wanted her to.

She tried hard enough. But just when she was sure she was winning, and living for the moment, and being nice and light, her throat would get lumpy, and she would begin to cry. And she chose the most unfortunate places to weep in. Once her tears even fell into the astonished soup of the Centurion Club.

Gage Holden felt wretched about it. A man would, naturally. But, damn it, he had told her where he stood. It wasn't his fault, surely. And so—he got out, with what grace he could. He left for Europe. A woman who insisted on being tragic over a kiss or two was certainly not to be trusted further.

It was a damn shame, too. He had certainly liked her enormously.

So we shall pass lightly that chapter, and the nights when Joan Farley held Mary in her arms, and the days when Joan stayed home from the newspaper to make sure Mary didn't do something awful—and go on to a chapter five years hence.

V

"BUT, my dear boy, what is there to be histrionic about?"

"I love you, Mary. I'm mad about you."

"Oh, nonsense, Jimmy! What do you know about love?"

"More than you do, Mary Cavendish, if I am two years younger. Please marry me."

"Whatever for?"

"Why, whatever people like us do get married for—for love, and a home, and everything."

Mary looked thoughtfully at the young man beside her on the davenport which was still Joan Farley's bed. Joan was out to-night, being dined by some people who were making a fuss over her second book. Mary had been too tired to go. The card indexes at the Foundation were a little wearing.

"You're so beautiful, Mary."

"I'm faded, and thirty, and you're an idiot." Only one of these statements was true, for she wasn't faded, and the boy wasn't an idiot. She was a charming woman, with a reputation for quiet cynicism, and the boy was one of the Maine Dan-forths, and was doing quite well down town.

"Why are you cold to me?"

"Don't be so intense, Jimmy. You must play at love lightly. Then it won't turn on you and bite."

"Will you marry me if I cut out the heavy rôle?"

"You can't."

"Yes, I can, too. I can be a regular philanderer—if you'll only marry me."

Mary laughed.

"Doesn't it move you at all when I put my arm around you?"

"Of course, silly. I like the feel of your shoulder. You're nice."

"Oh, Mary, I swear I can make you happy forever."

"You're succeeding very well at the present moment, Jimmy. Never mind about the future."

"Then you will—oh, Mary, you will!"

GUERDON

How small a thing, and yet joy's very essence!

Reft of it, ah, the sorrow and the sting!

The nameless subtle sweetness of your presence:

O love, how small and yet how great a thing!

Clinton Scollard

"Pete the Shark" Finds a Name

EDITH TOWERS, MODERN MAID, ENCOUNTERS A CAVEMAN ON THE QUARTER-DECK AND CHALLENGES HIS COMMAND

By Ernest Paynter

THE tramp steamer Markwell, latest addition to the Oriental Ship and Supply Company, two days out from Hongkong, dipped her bow into a long, rolling wave, which, breaking easily over the fo'c's'le, swept down the deck, finally disappearing through the scuppers.

Caswell Towers, president of the company, chuckled with poorly concealed delight as, reclining in his steamer chair, he followed the renewal of the verbal conflict which had started at the breakfast table. Plainly his auburn-haired, tempestuous, spitfire daughter had awakened a Tartar when she had begun upbraiding the youthful skipper, who was responsible for the safety of the ship and the comfort of those on her.

Again a white smother of water rose over the bow, breaking into a spray which dissolved into a series of minute rainbows. Towers, an experienced traveler, barely touching the skylight with an extended hand, easily retained his comfortable seat; Captain Judson Peters, instinctively balancing himself, his body gracefully following each movement of the ship, breathed deeply and joyously as the breeze swept through his mass of manila-colored hair.

Edith Towers, alone of the three, was making heavy weather of the choppy sea. She felt inferior, almost disgraced, because, in order to retain her footing, she found it necessary to jam herself against the ship's railing and clutch the life lines with both hands. She realized that the effort thus expended detracted from the impact of her usually vivid personality and flow of words.

"Well," she again demanded of Peters, "what are you going to do?"

"Do?" The master shrugged his shoulders with all the insolence of arrogant and positive youth; his tone expressed near-contempt. "What is there to do? You're on the ship—the ship's here; don't want to return to Hongkong, do you?"

"Certainly not," declared the girl. "But Heavens! Can't you do better than this? Your ship's filthy; the food's vile, and the service—well, if any of father's tenant-farmers gave his pigs the accommodations we're getting, he'd be arrested for cruelty to animals."

Stepping to her father's chair during a temporary lull in the vessel's prancings, Edith kissed his bald spot; running a dainty hand through his sparse hair, she appealed to him for help.

"Poor daddy," she crooned, "don't you miss your warm bath and morning papers? Why, we haven't even a radio."

"I'm used to it," grinned Towers. "You know, my dear, I tried to prevent your making this trip, but you insisted that it would be a good postgraduate experience for your sociology course."

A sudden lurch of the ship drove the girl, with outstretched, clutching hands, to the rail.

"Really, Captain Peters," she reiterated, "this is unbearable. The steward and the pantry boy are very inefficient. I rang three times this morning before I got my hot water, and—"

"Slack away for a minute," interrupted Peters. "I know all that. What d'you expect on a tramp like this? Before we left Hongkong you knew what it would be. I explained that you wouldn't have the things you'd been accustomed to. You said

it would be interesting anyway—and now you're sore enough to bite one of the anchor chains in two."

"I can understand the ship not being comfortable," admitted the girl, "but father gave you a free hand in picking the crew. I should think you would have managed to get a few decent men."

"You do! Well, that shows just how much you know about the kind of people you have to take when you go after a white crew in China. Ten days ago your father asked me to take this craft to the States for him. I wasn't looking for the job, but, as I'd never seen my own country, I said I'd do it."

"When he told me to get a white crew, I informed him that we'd get a bunch of Oriental beach combers and cheap down-and-out crooks. He insisted that, as the ship was going to the States, we must have white men. Well, for the most part, we got the kind of a gang I expected to. If it hadn't been for the nine ex-navy men who had taken their discharge in China and were then ready to come home, we'd have still been waiting in Hongkong for mates, engineers, and quartermasters. Those navy people are the ones I'm depending on."

"Would it even be possible to detail some other man as pantry boy?" she asked. "I don't like the idea of bringing my own chair on deck because I can't find my servant."

Looking down at the girl from his height of six feet, Judson surveyed her carefully, from the sheer silk scarf to her white buckskin shoes. His appraising look took in her sparkling gray eyes, her nose with the little hump in the center, her firmly chiselled lips, and her delicate but strong chin. She flushed under his penetrating gaze.

"As I told you before," he finally replied, "this isn't a passenger craft. You're signed on here as stewardess. I haven't assigned you any work, but you can look out for yourself."

Turning, he started forward, and then swung half around.

"Another thing; I'm skipper of this packet, and, while you're on her, you're subject to my orders. If you don't like the way I run her—get off and walk."

II

"THE brute—the insolent brute! Why don't you discharge him, father?" demanded the girl. Her eyes followed the captain

as he strode forward, head erect, hands clenched at his side.

But Towers shook his head. He had been bossed unmercifully by his daughter, particularly since her mother's death. Evidently his sense of humor was roused by the sight of Edith getting a taste of her own medicine.

"Don't let that little red head of yours run away with you," he advised. "I can't discharge the captain of a ship in mid ocean—even if I am owner. As for walking, I don't care for that. Besides, he's right. He told us that this ship wasn't fitted for passengers, but I insisted on coming. Told him I must be in Los Angeles within a month, and that there wasn't another vessel leaving Hongkong for the States for three weeks. That's the reason I'm signed on as purser and you as stewardess. While we're at sea, he's boss."

"I suppose I'll have to bear it, then, but what is there so important in Los Angeles?"

"Nothing, but I wanted to make this trip with Peters. He doesn't know it yet, but he's been working for me for the past three years; been general manager of the Hankow Commercial Company. I own that among other things in China."

"Why are you so interested in him?"

Mr. Towers produced a huge pipe, which he filled and lighted. His daughter, sensing the ulterior purpose, moved to the windward side as the billows of smoke began to drift toward her.

"Thought maybe that would send you below, Puss," laughed her father. "You always want to know too much. However, I suppose you might as well know about Peters. He's had a very interesting career. He doesn't know who his parents are. I know more about that than he does."

"Shortly after the Boxer rebellion a missionary, named Peters, together with his wife, found a white child about a year old living with a Chinese family on a Yangtze River houseboat. The missionary managed to get the baby, took him to Hankow, and adopted him."

"They kept and educated him until he was about fourteen years old. Then he ran away and went to sea for about three years. By that time he was about seventeen—in 1916—he had a first mate's papers. He was very large for his age, and must have been an unusually intelligent boy. In 1916 he returned to Hankow and reentered school."

"When the United States entered the war, he got to Manila and enlisted on the destroyers which later went to Gibraltar. From what I gather he looked all of twenty-one, and readily passed for that age. By the time the war ended, he had risen to lieutenant. Immediately after the armistice he was returned to Manila, was demobilized, and spent another year at sea, finally getting his master's ticket. Then he returned to China, and traveled through the country for two years. Part of the time he was a teacher; part a traveling trader. In 1922 my Oriental manager heard of him, and offered him the Hankow post. He's been there ever since. That's our captain's history."

The girl listened with rapt attention. Occasionally her eyes strayed toward the bridge, where Peters, sextant in hand, was taking the sun.

"And he's never been to the States?" she murmured.

"No; that's the reason I'm bringing him there now—although he doesn't know it yet."

"You see," he continued, "I've figured it out that within the next five years China will become our biggest trade field. I want a man there who knows the country and the people. Peters knows the one end of it all right, but he doesn't know the business from the States angle."

"I intend to make him assistant pier superintendent of our San Verde docks; after a year of that I want him in our export offices; then I want him to spend a year just knocking around the country. I figure that in three years he will be able to return to China and run our business successfully. What do you think?"

"I never knew you to pick a loser," declared the girl. "Only—I wish you had told me this sooner. It might have saved me making a fool of myself."

"Possibly so—in your own eyes; I'm not sure about Peters's viewpoint."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'd be willing to wager that, other than the missionary's wife, you're the only white woman he's ever spoken ten words with. You know the Chinese don't think much of your sex; think women are nuisances—and he looks at most things from the Chinese standpoint."

"Captain Peters," remarked Edith, that evening at dinner, "I suppose you're quite anxious to see the States."

"Oh, I suppose so," he replied carelessly. "I don't know as it makes any difference at that. A person's got just so much time to put in, and it doesn't really matter where he spends it. I passed one winter in a Buddhist temple in the Himalayas, and another in the imperial palace in Peking. Looking back, I don't know that there was any great difference between them."

A look of wistful hunger clouded his eyes for a breath, and then disappeared. "Sometimes I think I'd like a home, though," he added.

"But surely you intend to try to locate some of your relatives while you're in the States?" suggested the girl.

Peters looked at the girl steadily for a full minute, his frowning face and compressed lips indicating that he did not care to discuss personal affairs.

"If it's any of your business—which it isn't," he finally announced, "as far as I know I haven't a relative in the world. Anyway, who would want to claim kinship with a Chinese beach comber like me?" Rising from the table he swung up the ladder.

"Told you to lay off him," declared Towers.

"The skipper's powerful touchy about this kinsfolk stuff," interposed the mate. "He has an idea that people look on him as a half-caste because he was born in China."

"At least he might be courteous," retorted the girl.

"You've got to make considerable allowance for him," replied Towers. "In regard to his courtesy—well, I spent a week knocking around Hongkong with him. I heard him talk with men of every class, from mandarins to rickshaw drivers. His courtesy, as he sees it, is exactly suited to the person with whom he is talking. You just don't count—that's all."

"Well," observed Edith thoughtfully, "if he's going to spend a year in San Verde, he's got to learn just how much we do count in the States—and I'm going to see that he has a good teacher."

"That's another of the reasons I'm bringing him over; only don't mention this San Verde business. I'm holding that off until we make port."

III

THE following morning the girl received further enlightenment as to Peters's views

on womankind. She, her father, and the captain were standing at the poop rail, watching two of the nondescript crew, who were indolently chipping rust from the foot of the mainmast, preparatory to painting.

"What 'd you do with your last woman 'fore you pulled out, Bill?" queried one.

"Turned her adrift; didn't have time to bother with her. What 'd you do with yourn?"

"Charlie-the-Hop took her; give me twenty-five plunks an' two plugs o' tobacco for her."

"Corkin' good price, I'd say. Was she willin'?"

"Hell, yes! She'd tried to knife me a couple o' times; said I was lickin' her too often. Lotta nerve, eh?"

"I'll say so; but they're all gettin' too independent. Chiny ain't what she used to be. Why, when I first hit there, twenty-five year ago, five dollar Mex. was a good price to pay for a woman. Now you gotta get way back in the country 'fore you can buy one at all. Them Chinks ain't civilized any more. Time to get out, I guess."

Edith glanced at Peters. To him evidently the conversation they had overheard was of slight interest.

"I suppose that's your idea, too, captain, since you're also leaving China?"

"Possibly—although I think twenty-five dollars entirely too much for a woman, let alone throwing in the tobacco."

"Do you mean those men were speaking the truth?"

"I presume so."

"And you picked men of that type for our crew." The girl's tone was freezing.

"Why not? I didn't hire them for their morals. I realize that they're not Admirable Crichtons," and then, noting her sudden look of surprise, he added: "Oh, I may be a brute, but a fairly well-educated one. Mister," as the first mate passed along, "see that our bunch of scum takes a bat. every day. If any of them object, trice 'em up and use sand and canvas; that 'll remove both dirt and skin."

"How about water?" objected the mate.

"There's a whole ocean full of it," he replied, waving a hand seaward. "No sense using fresh water for 'em."

One of the men paused in his chipping, stretched himself lazily, and, evidently for the captain's benefit, remarked:

"Damn' 'f I'll wash in salt water, an' no bloomin' skipper's goin' to make me."

Seizing a line, Peters hastily made fast a bucket. Lowering it into the sea, he drew it up, full to the brim. Raising it high overhead, he hurled bucket, line, and water direct at the sailor, who had turned his back, and was again slowly wielding his chipping hammer.

"Won't wash in salt water, eh?" joyously shouted the captain. "Well, you will once, anyway!"

At the cry the man swung around, the bucket catching him full in the side, while the water doused him from head to foot. An instant he stood dazed, then, with a yell of rage, he snatched a sheath knife from his belt and started toward Peters, who waited until the man was halfway up the ladder. Then, drawing back his foot, he loosed a terrific kick, which, catching the sailor full in the chest, hurled him to the deck below, where he lay gasping for breath.

Hearing the confusion, the watch below had hastened aft. Two of them lifted the semiconscious man, and, half dragging, half carrying him, started forward.

"Any of the rest of you wharf rats want a salt-water bath?" queried the captain. His voice was low and silky—it was almost pleasant.

For an instant the challenge went unaccepted. Then a weird-looking figure stepped forward. Old and gnarled, bald-headed and toothless, only his eyes and voice showed animation.

"We'll have ye in jail fur this!" he yelled shrilly, his face, hands, and shoulders twitching nervously. "We're all white men, an' we know our rights!"

"Hopped up again, Inasley, eh?" retorted Peters contemptuously. "Well, you'll hardly live the trip out, and then it's a piece of canvas with a bag of coal at the foot for you. White men! Yes—you're all white men; Heaven help the name! Get for'd!" Turning, he started below.

"Captain Peters—just a minute, please."

Mr. Towers, who had watched the performance in frowning silence, raised a hand as Peters swung angrily around.

"Captain," continued the owner, "I don't want to interfere; as purser it isn't my place. I just want to remind you that, while you are captain of this vessel, I am the owner, and I'm not looking for any unfavorable publicity when we hit port. If that man should prefer charges, I would be compelled to testify against you. Please

use a little more discretion during the remainder of this trip."

"I'm capable of running my ship!" snapped Peters.

"I know—I know." Towers's voice was conversational, but into his eyes had come a storm signal, together with a slight tightening of the lips. "Only please remember that any trouble will be laid at the door of myself and Miss Edith."

"You don't know this bunch."

"Possibly not—this particular crew, but I've handled men of many nationalities under varying conditions. I have seldom found a case where harsh methods were advisable—particularly *en masse*."

"Huh!" growled Peters. "I guess—" he hesitated a minute, and then shot below deck.

"He's a surly brute," declared the girl as he disappeared. "His treatment of that man was uncalled for."

"He's a harder proposition than I'd figured on," admitted Towers. "Still, we've got to overlook a lot in a man raised as he's been. Except during the war he's never associated with white people—at least very little. I'm hoping that his stay in the States will knock off a few of the corners."

"I wonder how much he got for his wife?" asked Edith, unexpectedly. "In China it seems to be the fashion to dispose of them before leaving."

Towers carefully lighted his pipe before answering. The girl somehow found his gaze disconcerting.

"No, I guess that's one thing he can't be charged with," he finally replied. "From Blood Street in Yokohama to Hickey Johnson's in Cavite, and from the 'Flag-of-All-Nations' in Shanghai to 'The Stairs' in Sydney, he's known as a rough-and-tumble, eat-'em-alive fighter; but as far as women are concerned, he's got a clean record. I had my agent go into that thoroughly before employing him."

"I'm glad he has some traits of a gentleman," observed the girl. "Still, if women had any attractions for him, he would consider that buying them was the proper thing."

"No, I hardly think so. Come on, I hear the steward announcing lunch."

IV

THE meal passed in silence. The ex-navy men left the table immediately they finished; only Towers, his daughter, and

Peters lingered. The latter toyed absently with his knife, and started to speak several times. Plainly, he had something on his mind.

"I suppose you two think I'm a savage," he finally began. "Well, maybe I am. But I want you to remember that until 1917 I'd never really known but two white people—my adopted father and mother. When I ran away and went to sea, I couldn't mix with the officers, because I was a deck hand, and I refused to knock around with such white men as we had in the fo'c's'le."

"I guess I wasn't much good, but, at least, I was better than any of them; better mentally, morally—and yes, better physically, even if I was only a kid. I know it, because, being a kid, I had to prove that I could lick any of them."

"Oh, we had some sweet-scented crews; hopheads, murderers, thieves, and the general rakings and scrapings of hell that drift to China. I served on the one ship for three years; figured I'd do better that way than by shifting around."

"I was in the fo'c's'le a year, and then made boson when I was only fifteen years old—but I always was big for my age. I was finally made third mate, and moved aft. The other officers didn't want to associate with me; guess they thought I was a half-caste. The main reason I went into the navy during the war was to clinch my citizenship. I got my commission, and I'm pretty proud of it."

"Mind you, I'm not trying to apologize for what I am; I think I've done—what the devil, now?"

The ship gave a sudden lurch, and the clank of the working engines beneath them ceased.

Peters leaped to the speaking tube.

"What's wrong down there?" he demanded of the engine room.

"Nothing," came the answer. "Must be the propeller; can't move it either ahead or astern."

Followed by Towers and Edith, Peters ran up the ladder and back to the stern.

"Nice mess," he finally announced.

"What is it?"

"We've picked up a hawser with our propeller, and it's wound around until it's jammed into the shaft sleeve. Puts us out of commission."

"Queer place to hit a hawser—here in mid ocean," observed the owner.

"Not so very queer; it's probably one which some of our little playmates, who objected to taking a bath, ran over the stern and into the propeller. Fine business—with no diving gear on board."

"What are you going to do?" queried Towers.

"I don't like the looks of that sky or I'd break this crew's heart. I'd make 'em shift every pound of ballast for'd and raise the propeller out of water. As it is, I'll have to go down and cut that hawser adrift myself. Got to be a quick job; barometer's been dropping for the last three hours. Mr. Bowen"—as the mate hastened aft—"rig a stage over the stern. I'm going below and shift into bathing trunks."

"Sharks out here," objected the mate. "Sure; rig the stage."

Miss Towers gasped with astonishment when Peters came on deck clad only in his bathing trunks. Except for his height, he had seemed almost slight; now his muscles shone to full advantage. With nothing massive about him, every movement set muscles leaping and writhing. His skin, except for face, neck, and arms, which were a deep brown, seemed almost delicate in its whiteness.

On one arm was tattooed the Crucifixion; on the other the Coat-of-Arms of the United States; covering the full expanse of his chest, poised as if to strike, glared the defiant head of the Chinese imperial dragon. Around his waist was strapped a sheath knife, the blade of which was at least a foot long.

Striding to the rail, he swung easily over, grasped a line, and slid to the stage hanging just clear of the water. Taking a deep breath, he stepped off, gave a slight twist of his body, and in an instant was holding on to the protruding shaft, hacking at the hawser with quick, strong strokes. His stay under water seemed interminable. Suddenly, letting go all holds, he shot to the surface, grasped the stage lines, and lifted himself gracefully from the water. Only a slightly labored breathing indicated fatigue.

"Need anything?" called the mate.

With a shake of his glistening, blond head, he again slipped from the board. This trip he slashed the obstruction adrift and began ripping out the strands inside the sleeve.

Six dives he made before hailing the mate.

"Start the engines slowly—give 'er a couple of revolutions."

In response to the mate's order, the propeller began to revolve jerkily, stopped, made another half turn, and again halted.

"All right," called Peters. "Hold her at that. I'll finish the job in one more trip."

Again he dropped into the water.

Suddenly Edith clutched her father's shoulder.

"Look!" she whispered hysterically, pointing just behind Peters.

"Good Lord!" gasped Towers. "And nothing we can do!"

A huge shark had sidled up to within a few feet of Peters, who, ignorant of its presence, continued his work. Suddenly the brute gave a slight flurry with its tail and glided past the diver, rasping his shoulder with its rough, sandpaper-like hide.

Peters swung around as the fish again headed toward him. Man and shark gazed at each other an instant, and then the long, sinuous form backed away while the captain rose to the surface and hauled himself to the stage.

"Thank the Lord!" shouted Towers. "Certainly thought he was going to make a meal off of you, captain."

"Not me," declared Peters grimly. "They're cowards, and don't tackle anything that 'll face 'em. But I believe I'll have a fish dinner to-day."

Rising to his full height, clutching the knife in one hand, he dived headfirst, coming up under the shark, which had barely moved. Thrusting the knife into the fish's lower jaw, he gave a long, sweeping stroke, slitting its belly from mouth to tail. Open mouthed, the creature endeavored to hurl itself at the man, who, easily avoiding the rush, rose to the surface for a gulp of air.

Down he shot again. A second time he gave a terrific stroke, the long, slender blade cutting through the flesh as if it were tissue paper. With a final flurry, the shark rose to the surface, and lay, belly up, its vitals still palpitating with life. Peters rose to the top; with a long, easy stroke, he drew alongside the carcass.

"Look out!" suddenly screamed the girl. "There's another—just behind you!"

Glancing over his shoulder, Peters saw a triangular fin splitting the water, not more than twenty feet away. Hastily dropping the knife into the shark's open belly, he gave the body a swift shove, which

drove it alongside the ship. Then, with a terrific backward thrust of both legs, he fairly catapulted himself to the stage, to which he swung, barely hauling his feet clear as the second shark, open mouthed, teeth glistening, turned on its back and flashed past.

Leaning over, the man chopped a huge piece from the first shark's side, with a mighty heave threw it up on deck, and then, hand over hand, climbed aboard. His arm was raw and discolored where the shark had touched him.

Stepping to the speaking tube, he called to the engineer:

"Full speed ahead!"

Picking up the hunk of meat, he handed it to the cook, who, with the entire crew off watch, had witnessed the performance.

"Fry that for my supper," he ordered.

Turning to Towers and his daughter, he eyed them carelessly for a minute.

"A lot of sharks, both land and sea, have tried to make a meal off of me," he finally remarked.

"Mister," he called a minute later as the mate started below, "make certain that everything's well secured. Looks like we're running into a blow."

From one of the crew came a subdued whisper.

"He's a shark hisself; a bloomin' man-eatin' shark, that's what he is;" adding a breath afterward, "Pete the Shark's a good, proper name for him."

Peters laughed grimly; from the awed look on the faces of the men they were completely cowed by the exploit; future orders would be obeyed.

V

As the vessel gathered headway a swiftly increasing tumult in the sea announced that the fate intended for Peters was being visited on the wounded shark by his fellow denizens of the ocean.

Within an hour the sea began to rise. At first there came only long, low, greasy rollers, which thudded lazily against the ship's side. By nine o'clock that night the vessel was fighting a howling gale. The wind screeched through the rigging, and huge seas swept her stem and stern. The course was changed, and the billows taken bow on. From every nook and cranny came creaking and groaning as the puny craft, struggling for steerageway, defied the storm king. From astern rose a harsh

growl as the bow dipped and the whirling propeller thrust itself clear of the water.

Only once did Peters come to the mess room. Pitched and tossed from side to side, Edith, sleepless in her narrow bunk, gazing between the tossing curtains of her door, saw him standing there for an instant. Legs spread far apart, his body followed each motion of the vessel. Water streamed in rivulets from his sou'wester and raincoat, forming little, glistening pools at his feet. In one hand he held a huge mug of steaming coffee; in the other he clutched a sandwich. He had missed supper, and Edith shudderingly wondered if the sandwich were made from shark meat.

The morning brought no relief. Cold, soggy bread, and meat, and hot coffee were handed out by the mess boy. To set a table was impossible. Peters came in for a minute only. On his eyebrows glistened little crystals of salt, but his movements were quick and accurate.

"How's everything below, chief?" he asked the engineer.

"She'll hold together—what are we making?"

"Nothing! Engines turning over for nine knots, and we're barely holding our own. We're right in the center of the typhoon, and Lord only knows how long it'll last. Mister"—to the first mate—"let's inspect the hatches; don't trust that carpenter of ours."

Stepping to his cabin, he returned with a top maul, which he balanced as if it were a toy. As he started to the deck he again addressed the mate:

"Pass it along for all hands to keep below except when they're on watch. Any one goes overboard in this blow'll have to swim for it. No chance for a lifeboat."

When he returned, the girl was alone in the mess room.

"Captain," she asked, as he started forward, "would it be possible for me to go on deck for a few minutes? It's quite close down here, and I'm not feeling any too well."

Peters looked at her closely. Her eyes had lost their luster; her face was pale and wan.

"All right," he finally replied. "But you'd better come up to the bridge; that's the only dry place on the ship. I don't know, though—this wind'll rip your skirt off."

"I have some knickers," she suggested.

"Some what?"

"Knickers—women's trousers."

"Uh—never heard of them. All right, get a move on. I'll wait—don't want you to try to get for'd alone."

She was gone but a few minutes. When she returned, Peters gazed admiringly at the slim, boylike figure.

"By George!" he declared. "You make almost as good-looking a boy as you do a girl—not but what—" he hesitated, and then added: "You'd better wear my spare raincoat; I'll get it for you."

It was the first courtesy he had shown the girl, and she felt elated.

They stepped on deck as a green sea smashed over the fo'c's'le and tore its way aft. Retreating was out of question. Snatching her with one arm, with the other Peters welded himself to the poop-deck ladder. Knee-high, the water boiled and raged around them, snatching hungrily at their feet, and threatening to tear them from their refuge; the girl could feel the man's arm crushing her side.

"All right!" he bellowed, as the flood swept through the scuppers. "Full speed ahead—you first!"

Impetuously they dashed forward, dodging cleats, lines, and bitts, as another sea climbed over the fo'c's'le.

Edith had not realized the force of the gale until she stood on the bridge, sheltered by a canvas screen. Jammed into a corner, both hands clutching the rail, she got her first glimpse of the battle.

The sea seemed a living monster, intent on devouring them, as it hurled itself against the frail barricade. It tore and snarled at the ship, worrying at her as a wolf worries its helpless prey. The wind, ripping the crest from the waves, broke it into a silvery spindrift, which hurled itself high on the bridge. The pellets of water stung like shot, such was their impact. The man at the wheel struggled and tugged, and was almost dragged from his feet as he fought to keep the ship headed into the sea.

"This is glorious!" shouted the girl, the color slowly returning to her cheeks.

"Yes, as long as you're on a ship, instead of out there hanging on to a life preserver."

"Is there any danger?"

He shrugged his shoulders carelessly. No braces or hand holds for him; his body responded pendulum-like to pitch and roll.

"These typhoons are always dangerous.

I've weathered a couple of 'em. No more danger to this one than the others, except we've got a green crew."

Until noon they remained on the bridge, scurrying below for a hastily snatched cold meal.

Edith looked into her father's room. Evidently he had not turned out during the entire morning.

"Have your lunch yet, daddy?" she queried.

"Oh, yes; the steward and I have become friends; he's doing pretty well by me."

"You're the only one that's getting anything like that, you old fraud," she laughed, toying with his hair.

"I know how to get along with people. How's your brute treating you?"

"He's not a brute!" retorted the girl. "At least, he's been acting wonderfully well since the storm."

As if to confirm her words, Peters appeared at the door.

"Evening, Mr. Towers. I've brought your gear, Miss Towers, if you care to try it again." He held out the rain clothes.

Edith had decided that it was the man's nature to be fighting something constantly. Now that he was fighting the typhoon, he had neither time nor desire for minor battles.

Again, between smothering seas, they rushed to the bridge. For the first time since the voyage began, Peters attempted to entertain the girl. He explained the nature of typhoons, how at times a ship might get caught in the center of one and be compelled to fight for days; again, barely touching the outer edge, she might be clear in a few hours. He talked of many ships and crews, but of his life ashore in China he was strangely silent.

By dusk the girl's eyes were leaden, her body wearied by the constant wrench and strain of balancing with the ship's corkscrew plunges.

"We'll sleep the sleep of the just tonight," she declared.

"Yes—maybe so. Come on, you'd better get below before dark."

VI

THE warmth and light of even the close, swaying mess room were welcome. A glance showed that her father was asleep. Peters remained below but a few minutes, hastening bridgeward, food in hand. She

nodded as she ate, and was barely able to muster energy to change into dry clothing. Then she climbed into the bunk.

When she awakened it was broad daylight. The ship still rolled uncomfortably, but the sickening pitch was gone. A look through the air-port glass showed that the sun was shining, though the waves still swept high across a barren waste. Hastily dressing, she went into the mess room.

For the first time in two days a warm meal was served. The first mate was at the table alone.

"Good morning, Mr. Bowen," greeted the girl. "Well, we've managed to survive this time."

"Yes—thanks to Captain Peters. It was a bad blow, but he knew how to handle the ship."

"Where is he now—on the bridge?"

"No, he turned in about twenty minutes ago. You see, he's—he's been on the bridge about forty hours, and needs a sleep." Edith thought she detected a trace of worry in his voice, but decided it was her imagination.

"Have you known him long?" she queried hesitatingly.

"I've actually known him about a month; I've known of him ever since I joined the Naval Yangtze patrol, about two years ago."

"He has quite a reputation, I believe."

"I'll say he has. He's crazy about being recognized as an American citizen—wants everybody to know it. Why, one night he was in a rum joint in Shanghai, and four or five lime-juice beach combers drifted in. They were half seas over when they hit the dump, and they started picking on Peters. He let them get away with it until they began warbling a song 'When Britannia Made Columbia Tremble'; he shot back with the tune of 'God Save the King,' only he changed the words a little.

"Man dear, they say that when the police finally got through, Peters was the only man there. He was standing in one corner, half blind, almost unconscious, all his clothes ripped off except shoes and underwear, but he was still bellowing his idea of the proper words for 'God Save the King.' Some man!"

"Disgusting," ejaculated the girl, her eyes belying the word.

"Marvelous!" shouted another voice, as Mr. Towers joined the two. "That's the kind of men we need; if I had my—"

From the deck came a wild shout, with a clatter of running men.

"Man overboard—port side!"

The three at the table started from their seats, but before they had risen, the captain, fully clothed, flashed past and darted up the ladder; evidently, he had turned in ready for a call. The mate reached the poop a minute after Peters, followed by Towers and Edith. They found Peters, a belaying pin in hand, crouched in front of the lifeboat.

"Not by a damn sight!" he shouted to a group of men who were huddled directly opposite. "You'll lower no boat in this sea! It wouldn't stay afloat five minutes. Even if you got him, I'd never be able to hoist you aboard again. Better one man than seven."

"We're not goin' to let Bill drown an' not make a try for him," growled a huge, hulking six-footer.

"You're not, eh?" grated Peters. "Well, you're going to do what I damn well tell you!"

"Not by—" began the other.

Shifting the belaying pin to his left hand, Peters sprang at the speaker. The man attempted to defend himself, but the full-arm smash, tearing through his guard, landed flush on his jaw. Swinging half around, he dropped to the deck.

"Any one else want to run this ship for me?" demanded the captain, again facing the mob. "No—then get below, you scum! Get below, or I'll put an overhand knot in every blasted one of you!" He started toward the crowd, weapon raised high overhead. "Take that with you!" he ordered, pointing with one foot toward the still unconscious man.

"You beast—you cowardly beast!" panted Edith as the men started forward, dragging their mate.

"Steady, Edie, steady," warned Towers.

"What 'd you say, miss?" demanded Peters.

"You beast! Because they want to save a shipmate's life you treat them as if they were so much vermin. That man named you right—'Pete the Shark.'"

"You pipe down," ordered Peters, "or I'll—"

"You'll what?"

"I'll—what's that, mister?"

"He's managed to get the life preserver. I just saw—there he is now—about three points for'd of the port quarter."

"The fool has, eh?" shouted Peters. "All right, stand by! We'll pick him up."

"Lower a lifeboat?"

"No! Hold fast everybody! I'm going to swing ship, and hell's going to break loose. Mister, you and the second mate make ready with heaving lines!" he shouted, darting down the ladder and forward.

"Some man—some man!" declared the mate, reaching for a heaving line.

"Do you mean to say you approve of what he did?" demanded the girl.

"Sure—hold on, everybody!" he belted, as the vessel began to swing broadside to the sea.

Until the ship fell into the trough, Edith had not appreciated their helplessness. The Markwell heeled over farther and farther; it seemed she must capsize. Her lee rail dipped water; from the galley came the rattle and bang of pots and pans, from the after hold sounded a terrific crash as the cargo went adrift. Down on the well deck one of the crew dropped to his knees in frantic prayer; from another came a burst of obscene oaths; the opium fiend, Insley, began to scream and laugh hysterically.

"Lord, what a bunch!" muttered the mate.

"I'm afraid I—misjudged Captain Peters," admitted Edith, through clenched teeth. Her finger nails were fairly digging into the skylight frame to which she and her father were clinging. "I—didn't realize there was so much danger."

"Tell it to the marines," snapped the mate, who, leg wrapped around a stanchion, clutched the heaving line.

The incessant hammering of the broadside seas had listed the Markwell until it seemed that another inch would capsize her. Then, gradually swinging her stern to the waves, the vessel staggered to an even keel. Within a few minutes she was alongside the life preserver. Captain Peters, with superb seamanship, had maneuvered to furnish a lee for the rescue.

Three casts were made before a well directed heave placed the line across the sailor's shoulders. Hastily making a running bowline, he slipped it under his arms, let go all holds, and was dragged aboard.

"Took you long enough to get me," he whined. "Wonder you wouldn't let a fellow drown."

"Would if we hadn't been short-handed. Get below, and stay there! What's that, Miss Towers?"

"I was wondering if Captain Peters would try to swing ship again?"

"No. He'll keep on this course until the sea goes down; he don't take any unnecessary chances."

VII

THE vessel continued on the backward course all day. The next morning, when Edith rose, she found the sea practically calm, and the Markwell again headed east.

When she came to the mess room her father, Captain Peters and two of the mates were at the table. All wore an air of relief except the captain. He sat silent and heavy eyed, touching nothing but the coffee. Even this he barely tasted, nodding as he drank.

"When will we make Honolulu, captain?" queried Towers.

"About—" he began, and then, clutching his side, he gave a gasp of pain and slumped in his chair.

Hastily the two mates carried him to his cabin.

"You'd better stay out, Edith," directed her father, as the girl started to follow them.

She glanced into the room before the curtains were drawn. Shelf after shelf of books, in worn but expensive bindings, hid the walls. An electric reading lamp over the bunk indicated that the books were not for show. Alongside the air port, where it could get full benefit of the light, swung an ebony frame, in which was a woman's picture. The features seemed familiar, but Edith's glance was a hasty one.

Seated alone in the mess room, she waited anxiously, but it seemed years until her father came out.

"Lord, what a man!" he declared admiringly. "Nothing very serious, but he must have traveled through hell for the past three days. You know when that shark brushed against him and scraped the skin off—well, it infected his whole arm and shoulder. Swollen almost twice the natural size, the mate says it's been that way since the first night of the gale. Then, yesterday, when we swung ship, he took the wheel and handled the ship for about a half an hour. He strained one of the ligaments doing that."

"Besides, he's been on his feet almost seventy-two hours—and not a soul but the mate knew of his injuries. Why, an ordinary man would have been half dead by

this time. The two mates are undressing him now; going to give him an alcohol massage and bandage him up. What he needs is sleep; I believe he'll throw off the infection in a few days."

"Could I see him—after he's had some sleep?" she queried softly.

"Not before to-morrow. Be all right then, if he's better."

The following afternoon Edith paid her first visit to the sick man. At her knock he glanced up from his book, and then smiled, almost cordially.

"Fine business for a seagoing man—eh?" Seeing her hesitate, he added: "Come in. I'm tired and lonesome—also harmless. I even promise not to fight or argue. I'm too weak and helpless."

She glanced curiously at his books. Poe, Mark Twain, Henry, Jack London; volume after volume of history and biography, apparently all by American writers on American affairs.

"Here's another," he remarked, holding out the volume he had been reading. It was Homer Lea's "Valor of Ignorance."

"That's my Bible," he observed.

"Poor Lea," she commented. "He was a wonderful man."

"You knew him?" he queried eagerly.

"He and father were great friends; it was he who persuaded father to enter the Oriental trade. Of course, I was too young to appreciate him, but he would take me on his knee and tell me the most fascinating tales of China. He was half child himself."

"Lord! I wish I could have known him," declared Peters. "I saw him in China just once. He reminded me of a man who had lost something and was searching for it—knowing he would never find it."

Edith looked hastily at the framed picture. It was an expensive reproduction of "The Madonna and Child."

"That's the way I've always pictured my mother as looking," he observed, following her glance. "You see, I don't remember her at all—don't even know who she was—but I think she must have looked like that," he added wistfully.

"I'm sure she did—and I'm sure she would be very proud of you."

"You think so?" he asked eagerly.

"What woman wouldn't? I think—" She hesitated, and changed the subject.

She remained in the cabin the entire af-

ternoon. The following afternoon she again visited him. She and her father spent a portion of each evening there. Books—books—books; Peters could talk of nothing but the States and books about them.

For all his youth and condition, he was unable to leave his bunk until the Markwell was well past Honolulu; unable to come on deck until the afternoon of the day before she was due to arrive in San Verde. Then he joined Mr. Towers and Edith, who were seated on the poop. The owner pointed to a vacant chair.

"No, thanks. I'm preparing to pack."

"What's the rush? You'll be on here two or three weeks. I want you to keep command while the ship's getting overhauled."

"Not me. Just as soon as we're tied up, my contract's finished. Then I'm off for China. If I can't get a ship at San Verde, I'll head for Frisco."

"I understood you to say in Hongkong that you intended to remain in the States at least a year. When did you change your mind—and why?" Plainly, Mr. Towers was disappointed.

Peters deliberately turned his back on the two. Walking to the railing, he gazed toward the Orient, hands clenched at his side. When he swung around, his face was harsh and domineering, almost repellent.

"My mind's been changing since I first hit this packet," he finally burst forth. "I decided finally while I was laid up; had time to think then. What's there in the States for me? The Lord knows I've never had much of a home or many friends—but what I have got are back there." He waved a hand astern.

"I'm not your kind, anyway," he continued bitterly. "This trip's taught me that. I'm a blasted savage, and I guess I'll have to stay one; but I'll stay in a country and among people I understand. The States?" He shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "What for? No home, no friends, no people, not a soul there that cares a rope-yarn whether I come or go; whether I live or die. Besides"—his eyes met those of Edith—"it's a good skipper that knows the kind of cargo he's fitted to hoist aboard and stow."

VIII

TOWERS rose and walked up and down a few times, his head bent in deep thought. He appeared reluctant to speak.

"Well," he finally began, "you've put it up to me to tell you something I didn't intend to—wanted to save it until we made port and then have a surprise for you. Captain, stand by for a knock-out. You say you haven't a thing in the States. You're wrong! You've got a grandmother, a sister, two aunts, innumerable cousins, and—a thumping big bank account. All waiting for you right in Los Angeles."

Peters was unable to grasp the words. In a daze he looked at Towers.

"I don't get you—I'm all adrift," he muttered, but his face gleamed with a look of dawning hope.

"It is unexpected, I suppose," admitted Towers, "but here's the whole story.

"Your real name is Langdon; your grandfather, Judge Hector Langdon, was one of California's pioneers. Your father and I were classmates at Stanford. Shortly after graduation he entered the foreign mission field and was sent to China. He married there, an American girl, also a missionary. Their first child, Doris Langdon, your sister, was born in 1894.

"When she was five years old, and shortly before your birth, she came to Los Angeles to spend a year with her grandparents. After her arrival in California but two letters from your parents were received by your grandparents. One letter told of your birth; the other, received some three months later, stated that political conditions were getting serious in the interior, and that your parents were preparing to go to Peking.

"That was in 1900; shortly afterward the Boxer rebellion engulfed China. When things had quieted down, your grandfather began a search for you and your parents. He spent years, and thousands of dollars. It was not until 1912 that he was able to get the faintest clew. Then, a friend of mine, Homer Lea, who had spent years in China, happened to mention something about a white child whom a missionary had found living on the Yangtze with a Chinese family. The missionary had adopted the child, and was then educating him in Hankow. It was a slender clew, but the only one up to that time.

"Unfortunately, both your grandfather and Mr. Lea died in 1912. Judge Langdon, knowing that I was in the China trade, sent for me, and asked me to continue the search. It was two years before I was able to get to China and up to Hankow. By

that time you had disappeared; run away to sea, and the missionary had returned to the States. I put natives to work looking for the Chinaman from whom the missionary had taken you, but you know what it is to locate one man in that swarming, shifting mass of millions.

"In 1922, when you returned to Hankow, I had my Oriental manager offer you a place there as agent. Yes, I own that," in answer to a questioning look from Peters. "I did that because you were a white man; I was still far from certain that you were Judge Langdon's grandson. Finally, just four months since, my agents located the Chinaman for whom we had been looking so many years.

"For some time I had been intending to make an inspection through the Orient, so I hurried to China. I interviewed the Chinaman; he declared he had found you alone in a half-burned native house, but I obtained full proof that you are the grandson of Judge Langdon."

"You mean—I have a sister—a home—relatives—a country of my own, just like other people?" queried Peters slowly.

"Everything, my boy!"

"It's wonderful—magnificent," breathed Edith.

"You are sure there isn't any mistake?" asked the captain. "I hope you're right."

"Not a chance—not a chance. The Chinaman finally dug up a metal chest which he had found with you. It was covered with dirt and rubbish; it took three days of bribing, promising, and threatening before he would admit having found anything but you. In that chest were letters, old and faded, from your grandparents; pictures of your mother and aunts. No, there's no question at all but what you're a Langdon. Your features would be almost sufficient proof."

"Could I have the picture of my mother—now?" asked Peters. The harshness had disappeared from face and voice; he was just a wistful boy, looking for a home and friends.

"Certainly; it's in my room." Towers hastened below.

The boy and the girl gazed at each other a minute without speaking.

"Oh!" finally declared the girl. "Just to think—I've known your sister all this time; she's only a few years older than I am. I'm so happy and glad for you."

"Lord!" Peters tiptoed to his full height, raising his arms high overhead, as a young eagle spreads its wings for the first flight. Standing there, head erect, hair ablaze in the sun and flying with the breeze, he was a young sun god.

"Lord!" he again shouted ecstatically. "I've got a country and people of my own—and I've found a name at last!"

"You've found two names," smiled the girl.

"Two? How's that?"

"Langdon and —' Pete the Shark.'"

"Maybe so"—his eyes burned into those of the girl until, blushing, she turned away—"maybe so, but you can bet that I'm going to cut one of those names adrift with a lot of other things I've got that I don't like. The other name—well, I'm going to try to give that one to some American girl; one worth a lot more than twenty-five dollars."

Miss Cigale

IT SHOULD BE QUITE NATURAL FOR A GRASSHOPPER TO KNOW
MORE ABOUT PAWN TICKETS THAN DOES AN ANT

By Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

MRS. RUSSELL sat on the veranda, waiting for her son. A handsome and dignified woman she was, and a very calm one, but her calmness did not suggest patience.

On the contrary, she looked like one of those persons who wait until exactly the right moment, and then proceed to do whatever is exactly the right thing to be done, leaving late or careless persons to their well-deserved fate. Half past six was the dinner hour; at half past six she would go into the dining room, and if her son were not home—

He always was home, though. For twenty-three years he had been trained in punctuality, neatness, and economy, and his mother was satisfied with the result. She turned her eyes toward the west, where the sun was preparing to leave, gathering together his gorgeous, filmy raiment.

She was not looking at, or thinking of, any sunset, however, but looked in that direction because the railway station lay there, and she had heard a train whistle. It was not Geordie's regular train, but once in awhile he came a little earlier; and, though Mrs. Russell was too reasonable to expect such a thing, she hoped he was coming now.

It was nice to have an extra half hour

with her boy; nice to walk about the lawn with him, to talk to him, to listen to him, even just to look at him, as long as he didn't catch her at it.

No; he wasn't coming early to-night. The long tree lined street was empty, except for a woman who had just crossed the road. She was an odd figure; even the judicial Mrs. Russell had to smile a little at her frantic progress. A flower crowned hat had slipped far to the back of her head, a gray dust coat, unbuttoned, flew out behind her.

She walked bent by the weight of two heavy bags, pressing forward in haste, as if struggling against a mighty wind. She came nearer, and through the branches of a tree a shaft from the setting sun fell upon her wild fair hair.

"But—goodness gracious!" said Mrs. Russell, half aloud. "But—no! Nonsense! It can't be!"

For there had been somebody else, with wild fair hair like that, shining not gold, but silver when the sun lay on it; somebody else slight and tall, and always in a desperate hurry. That was years and years ago.

She got up and came to the edge of the veranda, a queer flutter in her heart. Could there be any one else with quite that air—

distinguished, and yet a little ridiculous, and somehow so touching?

"Louie!" she said, incredulously.

Down went the bags on the pavement. The newcomer stood where she was for an instant, then, headlong, rushed through the gate, up the steps, and clasped Mrs. Russell in her arms so violently that the flower crowned hat fell off and rolled down the steps. It lay on the gravel walk like a poor dry little flowerpot.

"Oh, Bella!" she cried. "Oh, Bella! Oh, Bella!"

"There—" said Mrs. Russell. "Sit down, my dear! Try to control yourself!"

As a matter of fact, she was crying herself, in a quiet, dignified sort of way. But, by the time she had gone down the steps and fetched her sister's lively hat, she had put an end to all such nonsense, and was quite calm again.

"I'm very happy to see you, Louie—" she began, but the other interrupted her.

"After all these years!" she cried, with a sob. "It doesn't seem possible, does it, Bella? We were young then, Bella. Oh, think of that! Young, Bella—"

"I shan't think of any such thing," said Mrs. Russell, tartly. "Do stop crying, Louie, please, and tell me something about yourself."

"It isn't me yet, Bella; not the poor, silly forty-five-year-old me. It's the other Louie, with her hair down her back, sitting here with the old Bella in that plaid dress. Do you remember that plaid gingham, Bella, that mother made for you? With the bias—"

"No!" Mrs. Russell replied. "I do not. I don't want to, either. What I want to hear is something about yourself, Louie—something sensible and intelligible."

"I remember you, Bella, so well—sitting at the piano, with a great black braid over your shoulder, playing that 'Marche Aux Flambeaux,' and poor father keeping time with his pipe. And that duet, Bella! You and I—the Grande Fantasia for Les Huguenots—" She giggled through her tears, and that giggle was more than Mrs. Russell could bear. It made the plaid dress and the duet and a hundred heartbreaking, dusty, forgotten things rise up before her.

"Louie!" she said. "I'm ashamed of you! When two sisters haven't met for—"

"For two lifetimes!" said the incorrigible Louie. "I don't care, Bella! The old things are the best."

"What," interrupted Mrs. Russell, sternly, "have you been doing all these years, Louie? Why didn't you ever write to me?"

"I never had time, Bella. I've been too busy, failing. I've failed at everything, Bella, everything! I gave my recital—and you must have read how quickly and thoroughly I failed there. Then I tried giving music lessons, but I was always late, or I forgot to come at all, or I'd feel not in the mood for teaching. Then I studied filing and indexing, and oh, Bella, you should have seen the awful things I did! You know I never was exactly methodical! Then I learned typing. I was a little frightened then, Bella. I really tried, at that. But, you see, I wasn't young any more then, and not good at the work. That failed, too. Then I tried to peddle things—scented soap, from door to door."

"Louie! I—I'm very sorry, my dear!"

"Well, you needn't be!" said her sister, drying her eyes. "It's been very wonderful—sometimes, Bella. I've been happy most of the time—because, you see, I never minded failing."

"Are you—" Mrs. Russell began, with no little embarrassment. "Are you—in difficulties now, Louie?"

"I haven't a penny in the world, Bella. You remember that fable of La Fontaine's we used to recite in school? '*La Cigale et La Fourmis*'? (The Grasshopper and the Ant.) I'm Miss Cigale, Bella, and you're Mrs. Fourmis. I'm the poor, silly grasshopper who danced the summer away—and here I am, Bella. It's winter—for me—and I want to rest, here with you, until the summer comes back."

"Oh, don't be so—'highfalutin'!" cried Mrs. Russell, stung by emotion into using a long-forgotten word. "Try to talk sensibly, Louie."

This was all so typical of her sister; all her memories of Louisa were made up of these queer little storms, these showers of tears, these rainbow smiles.

"Always so upsetting!" she thought, half angry. Yet there never had been any one dear to her in the way Louisa was.

"Come upstairs," she said, firmly, "and get ready for dinner, and then—Oh! There's Geordie!"

"Oh, Bella! Your son!"

"Louie, listen to me! You must not be—silly about Geordie. He won't understand it, and he won't like it. Do, for goodness' sake, pull yourself together!"

But Louie couldn't. She tried; she sat up very straight in her chair, and smiled, but Mrs. Russell was not satisfied. She wished that she had had time to put Louie in order before the boy saw her. He was so fastidious; what would he think of this unexpected aunt, with her wild, fair hair, her blue eyes swimming in tears, her trembling smile?

"She looks worn," thought Mrs. Russell, "but not—well, somehow, not grown up!"

Geordie had come up the steps now; a good-looking young fellow, and somehow touching, with his sulky mouth and his sulky blue eyes.

"Louisa!" said Mrs. Russell, in a threatening voice. "This is my son, George. Geordie, your Aunt Louisa!"

Poor Louisa said nothing at all, for fear of bursting into tears, but Geordie could be trusted to behave with decorum. He said something about this being an unexpected pleasure; said it punctiliously. But Mrs. Russell knew at once, by the tone of his voice, that he didn't like this aunt. She saw him cast a quick glance at her lamentable untidiness.

"Are those your bags, out in the street?" he inquired. "Shan't I get them?"

"Oh, no!" cried Louie. "Please don't bother! I'll get them!" And she made a sort of rush forward, which Mrs. Russell checked.

"Louie!" she said, sternly, and after Geordie had gone down the steps: "Louie! You must have more dignity!"

II

THERE was no dinner at half past six that evening, or at seven, either. When the clock struck the hour, there was Mrs. Russell sitting on the veranda, while her son paced up and down, hands in his pockets, and his face sulkier than ever. The sun was gone, now, and the clear sky was fading from lemon-yellow into gray; the honeysuckle was coming to life in the quiet dusk.

"How long is she going to stay?" he demanded.

Mrs. Russell didn't like that tone.

"Naturally I didn't ask her," she answered, stiffly. "She's had a great many—difficulties, and she's come here, to me, for a rest."

"D'you mean she's going to live here?"

She was hurt and amazed at his manner, but it was not her way to show it.

"Your aunt hasn't mentioned her plans for the future," she replied.

He walked up and down in silence for a time, and to his mother there was something ominous in his steady footfall; it was, she thought, as if he were going away from her, miles and miles away. Suddenly he spoke again, from the other end of the veranda:

"Isn't it hard enough for us to get on as it is?" he asked. "Without an extra—"

"George!" she cried, too hurt to stifle the cry. "Your own aunt!"

"Oh, let's look at the thing from a practical point of view!" he suggested, impatiently. "You know what my salary is, mother, and you know how far it goes, or doesn't go."

"Please!" said Mrs. Russell, curtly. "Surely we needn't discuss this now—before your aunt has been in the house an hour."

"Just as you please!" said he. "But—" Again he walked down to the other end of the veranda. "All I mean is"—he went on, in a strained unsteady voice—"that I can't do any more. I've—I've done my best, and I can't do any more."

Mrs. Russell sat like a statue in the gathering darkness. She had come face to face with sorrow and anxiety more than once in her life; she had had her full share of all that; but never, never before had anything wounded her like this. So she was a burden to her son.

All the little money left her by her husband she had used for the boy's education and welfare, with all her love, her time, all her life thrown, unconsidered, into the bargain. And now she was a burden to him.

"I've lived too long," she said as if to herself.

Geordie had stopped in his restless pacing to and fro.

"Mother!" he said. "You know I didn't mean it. Mother! I'm sorry."

"Very well, my boy!" she answered, in her composed way. "We'll say no more about it."

He came a few steps nearer, but halted; he hadn't been bred to the habit of affection. A hundred thousand old impulses that had been stifled by cool common sense made a great barrier now, just there, a few steps away from his mother. He turned away again, and Mrs. Russell did not stir.

It was over; that was their sensible way of dealing with all such matters; not to

take them out into the daylight and destroy them, but to shut them up, to weigh down the heart for many and many a day. They had ten minutes more alone there in the dusk together, ten long minutes, and neither of them spoke.

They were, of course, waiting for their luckless guest, and both silently condemning her unpardonable delay. But, if they could have seen her just then, down on the floor on her knees beside the neat little bed in the neat, strange little room, not weeping, but very still, as if a ruthless hand had struck into quietude all her flutterings.

She had come downstairs, quite airy, quite gay, in a fresh blouse and a not too dingy skirt, and, standing unnoticed in the doorway, she had heard her nephew's words. She had rushed up the stairs again, silent as a moth, except for the tinkle of countless small hairpins dropping from her riotous hair, and had sunk down on the floor like this, to taste failure again.

The clear chiming of the clock roused her. She got up, a little bewildered for a moment.

"I'll go away!" she thought, at first. But, after all, her failure had taught her something. She put more pins into her hair, a little more powder on her nose; she tried a smile or two before the mirror, and down the stairs she went, airy as before.

"The only really terrible thing," she said to herself, "is to fail because you haven't tried."

And so she did try. She sat at the table with her unsmiling and calm sister, her unsmiling and sulky nephew, and she smiled for three; she talked, and in the end she made them smile, not because she was especially witty, but because her sweet, light spirit gave a glimmer to all her words. She was ridiculous, but she was charming; she made of that sober family dinner a high festival. And when they had finished:

"Oh, let's have coffee in the garden, Bella!" she said.

"No!" said Mrs. Russell, startled. "We don't have coffee, Louie. I think it keeps one awake."

"But who doesn't want to be awake on a night like this? Let's be awake! Let's have a little table on the lawn, and candles—candlelight under the trees is so wonderful, Bella!"

"Mary won't like it!" whispered Mrs. Russell. "It means extra work for her."

"I'll do it! All alone!"

Mrs. Russell might have protested more, if she had not observed her son pushing the books and papers off the top of a small table in the next room. If he wanted it so, or if he were trying to atone, very well; she would agree to this absurd proposal.

So the table was placed in the back garden, and there Mrs. Russell and her son sat, to wait for Louie and the coffee. They sat there under the great dark beeches that rustled solemnly in the night wind and set the candles to flickering.

Candlelight wonderful under the trees? It was horrible; it was the most sorrowful, gloomy, bitter thing. Was that the leaves stirring, or a sigh from the boy? Mrs. Russell wanted to look at him, but dared not, for fear that their eyes should meet, and with what lay between them, they must not look into each other's eyes. A burden to him—a burden too heavy for his young shoulders—

Louie came across the grass with the tray, and this time Geordie's sigh was quite audible as he arose to take it from her.

"There!" she cried. "Isn't this nice?"

Her gay voice sounded very pitiful in the dark. Mrs. Russell resolved to make an effort to help the poor creature.

"Yes," she said. "It is—very nice." But no other words came.

There could be no silence where Louie was, though; even if no one spoke, there was a swarm of dainty little sounds, the clink of a porcelain cup on its saucer, the musical ring of a silver spoon on the brass tray; the sugar tongs against the crystal bowl.

"There!" Louie cried again. "Don't you smoke, Geordie?"

"Thanks!" said he, gloomily, and taking a cigarette from his case, he leaned forward to light it at the candle.

"Mercy!" exclaimed Mrs. Russell. The two others looked inquiringly at her, but she said hastily that it was nothing. For she certainly did not intend to explain what had startled her.

It was the sight of Geordie's face as he had leaned over the candle. His blue eyes had seemed to dance and gleam, the flickering light had given him a look as if smiling in impish glee—altogether, he had looked so much, so very much, as Louie had looked years ago.

He had drawn back into the shadows, tilting his chair against the trunk of a tree, and, feeling herself deserted, Mrs. Russell

tried to talk to her sister. Useless! Geordie was there, and could hear if he wished.

She understood what Louie was thinking about—what things she had in her queer, pitiful life to think about, what compensations she had found for missing wifehood and motherhood?

"Because she's not unhappy," thought Mrs. Russell. "She hasn't anything at all, as far as I can see, and yet she's not unhappy. Perhaps I'm as much a failure as she is. I meant to help him—to make him happy. But he's miserable. I've done the best I can; I can't do any more. It's as if his heart was breaking. Why? He has a good salary. I've only taken just enough to keep his home as he likes it. He has plenty for his clothes and whatever else he wants. I thought—I made him—happy."

Not one minute more could she endure this soft, dark silence; she wanted to get into the house, in the lamplight, safely shut into her home, away from the vast summer night.

"What time is it, Geordie?" she asked, so suddenly that he started.

"Nine," he replied.

"But what watch is that?"

"A new one."

"Then where's the one they gave you at the office, Geordie? Such a handsome one, Louie! A present to him on his twenty-fourth birthday. Engraved. Geordie, I hope you haven't left it about, anywhere. It's not a thing to be careless with."

"No; it's safe," he said, briefly.

"Where? In your room?"

"It's perfectly safe!" he answered, with such a note of exasperation in his voice that Louie pitied him.

"I'm sure—" she began happily, but her sister interrupted.

"Well, I'm not. You don't know what a boy that age is capable of. And it's a handsome watch. Geordie, I wish—There! Now you've broken this new one! Oh, my dear—"

For, as he arose, his foot had caught in the chair; he stumbled, and dropped the watch with a thud. It was Louie who recovered it; Louie who hastily gathered together the small oblong papers that fluttered out of his breast pocket. One had fallen at Mrs. Russell's feet; she stooped.

"What—" she began; but Louie fairly snatched it out of her fingers.

"Here, Geordie!" she said, gayly.

Mrs. Russell did not know what these tickets were, but Louie did. Louie knew well.

III

INDEED, all the three inmates of the house were heavy at heart that night, each with some especial knowledge not shared by the others. The night grew sultry, too, and when the morning came, it was the first day of real summer, hot and still. It was a day to make any one jaded who had not slept well.

Geordie was down first, and walking up and down the veranda; smoking, too, his aunt noticed.

"You shouldn't, before breakfast!" she admonished him, cheerfully. "And you can't smell the flowers, either, if you do."

He smiled, a forced, strained sort of smile, but civil enough, considering how unwelcome the sight of her was. He stopped walking up and down, too, and, after a moment, said, in a perfunctory voice:

"It's going to be a hot day."

"Geordie!" said she. "Let me talk to you!"

As much as his mother, did he hate and dread that note of fervor, of intimacy. He moved his shoulders restlessly, and smiled again.

"About time for breakfast," he murmured evasively.

"No, it's not. Geordie, you won't mind if I stay here with you and your mother for a little while, will you?"

He turned scarlet.

"No. Of course not," he replied. "Very glad."

"I want to stay—ever so much. But only if it can be my way. Because I'm a frightfully obstinate creature, Geordie; absolutely unmanageable. And I can't bear not to be independent. I'm going to find myself a job—"

"No!" he interrupted, with a frown. "Please don't."

She seated herself on the rail of the veranda, a most undignified attitude for one of her years, and yet, as always, there was a debonair grace about her; something unconquerably girlish.

"I will get a job, Geordie!" she announced. "That's settled. No matter where I live, I'll do that. But I want so much to stay here, if you'll let me stay on my own terms. Let me pay my board

and feel like a nice, independent business woman!"

"No!" he said, again. "I—it can't be that way."

"But why, Geordie?" she asked, smiling a little.

And he couldn't endure her smile; he couldn't endure her proposal; it was the final straw for his already mutinous and unhappy spirit. If she had any faint idea of what he already suffered from this talk about being "an independent business woman"; if she had imagined what a sore subject that was.

"No!" he said. "If you want to stay here and make mother a visit, you're more than welcome. But—I don't approve of women going out to work."

"What!" she cried. "Oh, but my dear boy!"

There was something in her good-humored protest that made him hot with resentment. She wasn't laughing at him—and yet, she might as well have been; she couldn't have pointed out more plainly the absurdity of his words and his attitude. Just by some little inflection of the voice, she made him the youngest twenty-five that ever lived—a boy, a child, a silly, pompous, impertinent young ass.

"I won't have it!" he said.

She saw her mistake then—she was always quick to recognize her failures—but it was too late to remedy it.

"I'm sorry you feel like that, George," she said, gravely. "Because, you see, I couldn't stay here unless it could be that way."

"Suit yourself!" he answered, briefly.

But he regretted the words as soon as they were spoken.

"I only meant—" he began, but when he turned he found her gone, vanished in her own quick, quiet way. He hurried into the house to find her, and looked for her everywhere, but in vain.

And it seemed to him that he could not go off to the city with this new burden upon his conscience. It was bad enough that he should have hurt his mother the evening before; bad enough to endure the other harassments that had tried him so sorely, for so long, without this new misery. He thought of his aunt's sprightliness; her gay and touching friendliness toward him; he remembered how grave her face had become.

"She might have known I didn't mean

that," he thought, dismayed. "I don't like her, and she'll be a bore and a nuisance; but I didn't mean to offend her."

And all the time he was perfectly aware that she wasn't "offended," any more than a clover blossom is offended if you tread it underfoot. It was he who had been offended at the idea of his mother's sister going out to work every day from under his roof—of any woman doing so, in whom he was interested. Come to think of it, he was glad he had said he "wouldn't have it"; he meant that. He had told Nell also that he wouldn't have it.

"Still," he admitted, "I might have been a little more—well, more cordial to her. Because I can see that she's another one of those people."

For lately the poor fellow had been learning something about that other sort of people—people not sensible and restrained, but full of fancies and notions and feelings; people who needed careful handling, unless you were willing to see that look of pain and disappointment in their eyes.

Mrs. Russell thought that her son looked pale and jaded that morning, and noticed, with a heavy heart, how little he ate.

"I suppose he's working too hard," she said to herself. "Wearing himself out, and wasting all his youth—to take care of me. I suppose what he wants is—"

But she couldn't quite imagine what he might want.

"Perhaps he'd rather go off and live in the city with one of his friends, like Dick Judson," she thought. "I wonder if I couldn't—" So there she sat, calm and composed as ever, making the most absurd plans for living on her own private income of thirty dollars a month.

"Perhaps Louie and I together might manage something," she thought. "Louie knows more than I do about things of that sort. I'll speak to her."

Geordie went off, and still Mrs. Russell sat at the breakfast table, waiting for her sister, and silently condemning this sloth that kept her so late abed.

As a matter of fact, Louie was half a mile away from the house, picking daisies in a wide, sunny field. Seen from the road, you might have thought that tall and slender creature with fair hair shining in the sun was a care-free young girl; she moved so lightly, and now and then she sang a snatch of song.

But all this was mere bravado, her own especial method of preparing herself for a painful ordeal. She had something to do that morning which she dreaded, and instead of taking an extra cup of coffee, or anything of that sort, the silly creature forgot all about breakfast and wandered off into a daisy field. No wonder she was such a failure!

She had peculiar compensations, though. The fierce hot sun, and the rank, sweet smell of the humble little field flowers and weeds, even the troublesome insects that crawled out from the daisies onto her hands, and the little winged nuisances that flew in her face, amused and solaced her, and did her, or so she fancied, more good than ten breakfasts.

And after a time she felt strong and tranquil enough to face her day. From a pocket in her skirt she drew out a bit of paper—one of those dropped by her nephew the evening before, and she looked at it carefully.

It was a pawn ticket, marked:

Gold Watch. \$50.00

IV

Now it happened that Miss Cigale, although she had said she hadn't a penny in the world, really did have sixty-five dollars. Considered as the savings of a lifetime, it might pretty well be called nothing, and in her careless way she had so thought of it; but now she saw it in a quite different light.

She had kept that ticket when she had picked up the others, for her idea was to get back the watch for her nephew and make him happy. And to make him, perhaps, a little fond of her. She had thought it possible last night; had thought that if she brought him his watch, and told him that she was going to take a position, he would see she wouldn't be simply an extra person to feed, but a friend and a helper; that he would like her, and they would all three live together in that dear little house, in that sweet, dear garden, in the jolliest way. She didn't expect any of that now, though.

"No," she said to herself. "I irritate and annoy him. I can see that. I'm afraid he belongs to the ants, and he can't endure grasshoppers. Oh, I'm sorry! He's such a dear boy!"

She didn't cry, for her tears were far more apt to be brought by joy than by

pain; but she was certainly unhappy, all by herself there in the daisy field. To tell the truth, Miss Cigale was very tired, and had of late been haunted by specters. Wan failure she knew and didn't mind, but when loneliness and uselessness came out hand in hand, she trembled.

"I'll get the watch," she decided. "I'll do that, anyhow. But I shan't come back. He doesn't want me here, and—he's a dear boy, but I don't think I want to come."

It was characteristic of her that she didn't tell her sister she would not return. If she had to do anything unpleasant, well, then, she did it, as gallantly as she could; but if unpleasant things could be avoided, right gladly would she sheer off. So she only said that she had to "run into town," and hugged and kissed her rather unresponsive sister, and off she went, leaving behind her those heavy bags which contained all the clothes and books and ridiculous, sentimental rubbish she had in the world.

"I can send for them," she thought, "when I decide where I'm going." And she troubled her head no more about them.

What did trouble her was a memory. It was a memory of a girl—a tall, slender, fair-haired girl, a music student in New York, living on an allowance from home. And living all too carelessly on it, so that one day she found herself penniless, and very hungry, and with four days to wait before the allowance could arrive. And this girl—in the persistent memory—had taken a little gold locket and a silver watch to the pawnbroker. She had thought it rather a joke, until she had got there.

"It's silly to feel like that," she said to herself this morning. "Very silly. There's nothing dishonorable or disgraceful in—in being temporarily short of money. The most important business men have to get loans. Heads of trusts and—every one. People go to their banks to get loans, and they're not ashamed of it. Well, this is exactly the same thing. I simply walk in, repay the loan, take the watch, and go. Exactly like paying a note at the bank."

Was it, though? Exactly like a bank—this queer, dark little shop, with barred windows—and the man behind the counter was exactly like the cashier her father used to bring home to dinner. She handed the ticket across the counter, with the money; but the man pushed the money back to her.

"Wait a moment!" said he, with a curious glance at her.

Then he disappeared, and Miss Cigale stood there, trying desperately hard not to feel like a criminal, an outlaw, a highly suspicious character. If she had been a man she would certainly have whistled; but, as it was, she stared about her with the most casual, offhand air.

Oh, but it was pitiful! To think that there were people so hard pressed that they must bring here a cotton quilt, or a dingy umbrella, or, worst of all, a child's pair of rubber boots. Hanging on a line from the ceiling were guitars and banjos and mandolins and ukeleles—music sold into bondage.

"Is this your own ticket, madam?" asked a voice, and, turning, she saw a severe little elderly man looking at her through his spectacles. The question dismayed her. He appeared so very much displeased; perhaps it was a wrong sort of ticket, which Georgie shouldn't have had.

"Yes. Oh, yes!" she answered, with a very poor attempt at sprightliness. "It's mine."

"You didn't buy it—or find it?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" Miss Cigale replied, quite certain now that there was something wrong. "It's my own!"

The elderly man looked at her steadily for a moment.

"Wait a minute, please!" he said. "Be seated, madam!"

So Miss Cigale sat down on a chair in a black corner, where a fur neckpiece, smelling terribly of moth balls, brushed her shoulder, and waited and waited. A little girl came in, gave up a ticket, and while she, too, waited, stared at Miss Cigale, and diligently chewed gum.

Such a queer little girl, with wispy hair, and a pale, drawn little face, and so very nonchalant an air. At last she was given a small gas stove, and went off with it. A young man came in with a traveling bag to dispose of; a stout woman came and drove a hard bargain over a ring. Nobody else had to wait, only Miss Cigale.

"Something is wrong!" she thought. "Oh, what has the poor boy done?"

Her hands and feet were very cold, her thin cheeks flushed and hot; she wished now that she had taken a cup of coffee. For she was very far away now from any such consolations as daisy fields. A burly man, with a straw hat at the back of his head, entered the shop; he spied her, and, to her horror, came directly over to her.

"You, the one with this here ticket; what's the number?" he asked.

"I don't remember the number," said Miss Cigale faintly. He went over to the counter and spoke to the elderly man in a voice too low for her to hear. Then he sat down beside her, tipping his chair, and lit a cigar. The smoke blew into her face, and his boot, crossed on his knee, brushed her skirt.

"I can't stand this," thought she. "I'll take the ticket, and come back later. I can't bear this." And she got up to go to the counter and ask for the ticket.

"Here!" said the man beside her. "Where you goin'?"

Miss Cigale didn't trouble to answer, but, to her amazement, he sprang up and barred her way.

"Go away!" she cried, in a trembling voice, but with a jerk of the thumb he turned back his coat lapel and revealed a badge.

Miss Cigale sank back into her chair again, in the dark corner. The man was speaking to her, but she did not hear him.

"What has he done?" she thought. "A detective! If I can only make them think it was me. But, oh! How can I bear this?"

Because, for all her failures, Miss Cigale had never before encountered disgrace. She had suffered the cruelest disappointments, she had been hungry, cold, shabby, sleepless with anxiety, and all this she had endured gallantly. But to be arrested by a detective in a pawnshop!

Her idea of what was going to be done to her might have been laughable if there could be found on earth any one able to laugh at the stricken, heartsick creature. She thought that she would presently be taken before a judge, and that, if she kept silent, as she intended to do, she would be put into prison for whatever unimaginable offense the real owner of the ticket had committed.

"I can't be brave about it!" she said to herself. "I can't; I'm—I'm frightened."

Why must she sit here so long? Why didn't they take her away? It would be almost better to be in prison than here, where the door opened and closed, and people came in and out, and every one had a glance, casual or curious, at her corner. The detective was writing in a notebook. What was he waiting for?

"Handcuffs!" thought Miss Cigale. "Or—or a—warrant." Imagination carried her

very far; she would not have been surprised by the entrance of a file of soldiers, or white-coated doctors with a strait-jacket. The most astounding images of things read or heard of filled her mind; she lost track of time and space; what she suffered was a timeless, universal thing, such as had been suffered these thousands of years by how many dazed and trembling victims. The law—The Law!

"Here she is!" said the detective to some one who had just entered. "Claims it's her own ticket."

"Oh—good—Lord!" cried a voice which reached Miss Cigale from very far away.

"Well, come along!" said the detective. "Come over to the station an' you can make your charge."

Miss Cigale did not understand; all she knew was that Geordie was here, and in danger.

"I—I don't know that man," she said, faintly.

"Never mind!" the detective retorted, laughing. "You will, soon enough!"

"No! Look here! It's—it's a mistake!" said Geordie. "It's—I'll drop it."

Miss Cigale moved nearer to him.

"Pretend you don't know me!" she whispered. "I'll—"

V

THAT was the end of Miss Cigale's struggle; at the critical moment she failed again, most shamefully. She fainted. That is what comes of preferring daisies to breakfast; of carrying romantic Victorian sentiments over into modern life. She fainted.

As long as she had failed, she thought she might as well do it thoroughly. She could have come to before she did; she could have opened her eyes before she did, only that there was nothing she cared to see. She could hear, too. She heard her nephew calling "Aunt Louisa!" but his low, furious tones did not make her in a hurry to answer. No; better to lie here, like this, for as long a time as she could.

"Aunt Louisa!" he said again, and this time his voice was quite desperate. She opened her eyes.

"If you'd only pretended," she whispered chidingly.

"Can you walk?" demanded the young man. "As far as a taxi?"

"But—" she began, and, raising her head, looked about her. The man behind the counter was writing in a book, the shop

was empty. "The—the detective?" she asked.

He didn't even answer; but, helping her to rise, and holding her very firmly by the arm, led her out into the street. No one molested them.

"But—Geordie!" she said. "Is it—postponed?"

"I don't know what you mean," he replied, curtly. "I've arranged the thing, anyhow, so that there'll be no trouble for you. But if you wanted that watch—why didn't you tell me? I'd have done anything, rather than have this happen."

"George!" cried Miss Cigale. "Is it possible? No; it can't be! You can't think that I—" She stopped short, looking into his stern face, and with an expression on her own that somehow troubled him.

Out here, in the bright sun, she seemed so different. It was hard to think of her as a muddle-headed, desperate creature, trying, very clumsily, to get possession of a watch that didn't belong to her. No; there was something about her that was—rather impressive. She didn't look ridiculous now, or pathetic.

"I see!" she said. "You thought I wanted the thing for myself. Well, that was quite a natural thing to think, George." She spoke without the slightest trace of rancor, simply admitting that it was natural—to some human beings—to think as he did, and she could not blame him.

"Well!" said he, surprised. "You see, when I couldn't find the ticket, I telephoned to the pawnbroker, and to the police. I thought it had been stolen, and I said that if any one brought it in, to let me know."

"Yes," said Miss Cigale. "It was a perfectly natural way for you to think, my dear boy. And I was frightfully stupid to try to do it that way. I meant to help you a little bit, but—" She smiled. "Anyhow, it's all over and done with now, and I hope we'll part good friends."

"Part!" said he. "But aren't you coming back?"

"I'd rather not."

There they stood, on the street corner, all idea of a taxi forgotten.

"But, look here!" said Geordie. "You did that for me—and I behaved—I behaved—like a—" His voice broke. "I didn't know," he went on, unsteadily. "Because, you see—I didn't think any one could—any one in the world."

"Oh, there are lots of people like me!" Miss Cigale assured him. "Lots of grasshoppers. They dance the summer away, and then, when the winter comes, they're a horrible nuisance to the ants, but they're inclined to be pretty sympathetic toward any one else who has grasshopperish troubles. Not that I think *you're* the least bit of a grasshopper, my dear boy! I'm quite sure *you're* far too intelligent and sensible for that!"

"No!" said Geordie, vehemently. "I am a grasshopper! Nobody knows what a grasshopper—and a fool—I am!"

"I'm sure it was just a temporary difficulty."

"I've been doing my best, for nearly a year, to make it permanent," he said, grimly. "You see, there's a girl."

"I'm so glad!" cried Miss Cigale.

"Glad? But I can't afford to think about girls."

"I don't care! As soon as I saw you, I hoped there was a girl," Miss Cigale went on. "Because you're such a dear, obstinate, helpless, splendid boy, and I hoped there was some one to see all that. She does, doesn't she?"

Geordie had grown very red.

"She sees the obstinacy, anyhow," he answered. "You see, she's a secretary, and—" His jaw set doggedly. "She won't give up her job!" he said. "And I won't get married unless she does."

"Too many won'ts!" said Miss Cigale.

"Well, all of them together make a pretty big can't," said he. "We can't get married, that's all. I've tried to make her see that we could manage, but she says we can't. Those—those tickets, you know. I bought her a ring, and a—" He had to stop for a moment. "A little inlaid writing desk for our home. Only—it's nearly a year, and she won't see that we can manage without her salary, and I won't—"

"Oh, Geordie!" protested Miss Cigale.

"I won't!" said he. "I won't!" And a more mulish expression was never seen on a young man before.

"Do get a taxi!" Miss Cigale suggested.

VI

AND not one of them realized the outrageous folly of that dinner! There they sat, Miss Cigale, and Geordie, and Nell, who was the girl in the case, in that expensive restaurant, eating all sorts of expensive dishes, and all fancying themselves so

businesslike! There was some excuse for Miss Cigale, but Geordie, who was considered a practical and level-headed young man by his business superiors, and Nell, whose employer could not say enough in praise of her good sense and ability—they should have known better.

"He offered the position to me," Miss Cigale was saying. "He almost begged me to take it. To be his personal assistant in his booking agency for musicians and concert singers, and so on. He said—" An odd change came over her face; she looked for an instant remarkably handsome and dignified.

"He said," she went on, calmly, "that no one else could handle his clients as I could—no one else would have just the right manner, and the sympathy and understanding of their problems. He always was very flattering, years ago, when I gave my unlucky concert. It's really a very good position. But I wouldn't take it then, because I was so sick and tired of jobs that didn't do the least bit of good to any one except myself. I'm so tired of working just for myself. But now, if we arrange this thing in a really businesslike way, you could take that sweet, tiny house at the end of your mother's street, Geordie. Nell could stay at home, to look after things, and I'd contribute toward the expenses, of course. It would be very much to my advantage—because then I'd have a home, you see."

There was a silence.

"Unless I'd be a nuisance?" Miss Cigale remarked.

"You couldn't be!" cried Nell. "There never was any one so kind and dear!"

"Unless Geordie objects?" said Miss Cigale.

He glanced at her, and then stared. For there was a light of the most charming malice in Miss Cigale's eyes, and such a significant hint of a smile on her lips. She was laughing at him! She was getting the better of him!

She was giving him a chance to get married in his own, obstinate way, with Nell safely at home, and, in return, she demanded absolute surrender from him. He could have his way—but only if Miss Cigale had her way, and defiantly went out to work every day from under his roof. Could he allow this? He looked at his Nell.

This time Miss Cigale didn't fail; she triumphed.

Things for the Home

HEIR TO THE TEPEE AND THE WAR DRUM, THIS INDIAN BRAVE
FALLS BEFORE THE WHITE MAN'S SUBSTITUTES

By Leo Crane

YELLOW DOG had been across the river, following an old trail—running down a relative in the hope of borrowing money from him. This uncle had none. So Yellow Dog caught a ride back on the government freight boat, working his passage by helping with a deck load of hogs that the Big Fellow, who bought most of the land, and had been at it for years, was shipping down river.

The muddy waters of the Missouri were not more clouded than Yellow Dog's thoughts. Like all those who work because of stern need, he wondered why the Big Fellow, who had lands, grain, and cattle, labored like a river rat.

"Hullo there, Yellow Dog!" called the dominant white on seeing the Indian. There came an interruption in his speech, an affliction that bothered the Big Fellow when he was most interested in his own fortunes. "Say!—er—what about that piece of land you were going—er—to sell me?"

"Dunno," replied Yellow Dog; but the query caused him to think. He would go to the office, after they had made the Agency landing, and inquire about that "special land sale" he had proposed some three months before. They should have word of it by this time.

It was Quail Woman's land, and she was dead, of course, or he could not be selling it. Even a dead wife was good for something. It would bring—well, lots of money, and his hard times would be over.

And then he would buy that motor car which Youngest Child wanted to sell, and perhaps Youngest Child would throw in a bottle of the strong medicine made down in the river brakes. It was a drink much preached against by those in authority, and acquired at some risk, but it warmed one against racking coughs.

Yellow Dog was not as strong as he once had been. He remembered that his father, too, had nursed a racking cough before going on the shadowy trail to new hunting grounds.

Now, his father's land had brought much money, but several older brothers had helped in the spending of it. The Big Fellow had bought it. Yellow Dog wondered why the Big Fellow sold all other things—hay and grain and cattle and hogs—and bought, always bought land.

And then, being in this reflective mood, he thought a bit more of his father, old Medicine Bear, who had fought Custer—a misty figure now—and who had taught him a song—a song against the white man. Old Medicine Bear, who had been out with Sitting Bull, was now in his last six feet of land on the river bluff under a big carved rock.

Yellow Dog was tired, and covered with a clammy sweat, when the hogs were unloaded. He felt weak and hungry as he made his way through the thick river woods and came out in sight of the white buildings. The Agency was a pleasant, cool-looking place, and one could always get ice water in the office.

"The major is busy," said a clerk; "but you can wait a little. Something about that special land sale? There were papers two mails ago, I believe. Better wait and see him."

Yellow Dog considered this good advice. Perhaps he would get his money.

The sound of music came from the "major's" house close by; a tinkling, quickening rhythm; but it did not appeal to Yellow Dog. He preferred the boom of the big drum on ration days, when the Indians held their tribal dance. The heavy throb of that instrument always called to him.

But the white man's songs, played in a box of wires, were annoying, for the sound beat upon his ears, and did not mean anything. Now the big drum talked stirringly.

The air in the office was heavy, so he went outside, coughing, and stretched himself in the grass close to the major's house. The windows were open. There was an automobile, a shining red car, standing in the driveway.

This was a far different machine from that which he planned to buy from Youngest Child, if he could ever get his money out of Quail Woman's land. But no matter—it would travel no faster, perhaps. A hum of voices came from the windows.

"Quite true. Yes, I believe in music and its stimulation. We have much of it at home here. That's my piano playing now. I like it, though it requires a lot of winding and attention."

"But you have a dynamo—you should have an electric drive," came a salesman's persuasive answer. "Music is a great cultural influence. See the effect of the phonograph these last few years; and now, with pianos and the classic compositions at every one's command—Of course, there are those who prefer the lighter music, and dancing."

Yellow Dog understood very little of this talk that drifted out the windows. White man's music was poor stuff, he thought. Who wanted a box of twanging wires? The big drum on ration days had something of rare power in it, like that old song his father had taught him. Then, when one was filled with meat and coffee, the drumming put heart into a fellow, even though he might have a racking cough.

The salesman's voice continued:

"Priced from three hundred dollars up. They come in different styles of cases, but I suppose that wouldn't cause dispute. Now, one having the electric drive is more expensive, of course. You could dispose of the old one you have, and apply that price on a better instrument. A great cultural influence, music. People who live in these lonely places should have something of uplift and diversion."

"Yes; I have long been interested in music, but I cannot change these spend-thrift people. They will buy anything, if given half a chance, you know. For a time it was the auto that appealed to them, until Amos Night Hawk bought a most expensive car that caused comment. One has to

exercise judgment in these matters with the Indian. There is Major Tompkins, who used to be agent here; he makes quite a good thing now in tombstones. And coffins sell well, too. They are a strange people. Nothing stingy about them. One has only to suggest that they should keep up with the times. I remember a woman who was constantly petitioning for an operation. The doctor agreed with her, too. Quite the fad here, you know—operations. But she was satisfied with a phonograph—and now that I think of it, that was much cheaper than a surgeon's fee."

II

YELLOW DOG wished they would finish and come out to business, so he could learn of his special land sale. He wanted to buy things, if he could get the money—that car of Youngest Child's, and that liquid product of the brakes made from grain in a tin boiler. His train of thought was again disturbed by the rackety-rackety music from the house. It was one of those strange airs. He had heard it at the ice cream place in town, and when the white people danced their stupid gliding dances at the fair.

Tum, tum, tumpety umpety, tum, tum, tum.

There was nothing of men and war in it. Now he preferred the big drum on ration days, when, after the feast, the stamp of feet and the clash of sleigh bells that each dancer bound to his leg, summoned all to the dance house. And there, four men stood and solemnly beat the great tribal drum, while all around them danced the warriors.

"Yellow Dog!" called the clerk.

He awakened hurriedly from this dream, to see the stranger departing in his red car, and the major going into the office.

"Ha!" chuckled the major, when Yellow Dog shambled in, too. He could be jovial when they talked of money. "Ha! Your wife's land may be sold, now, young fellow, and a good price offered for it. You will have capital, and you have idled long enough. You should get busy—to work—make provision for your old age. You have a house, and you next should have a good team of horses—and you need some things for the home. O'Brien has a first rate team of work horses—just the thing for you, Yellow Dog. I'll have the stockman inspect them to-morrow."

"But I don't want any horses," stammered Yellow Dog, surprised into frankness. "I'm sick, and I'll only have to turn them out. And I want to get a car."

"A car! What nonsense, what extravagance! You cannot afford to buy a car. You need a team and implements, and things for the home."

"I have a stove and all the kettles I can use," protested Yellow Dog, sullenly. "I don't want horses. Got horses enough slick in the brakes now, and I'm too sick to round 'em up for branding. I could sell horses. But I want money for clothes, and grub, and—and for other little things."

"How much for those things?"

Yellow Dog thought swiftly. There was Youngest Child's car to be had for one hundred and fifty dollars; and he would have to pay Youngest Child another five dollars for the bottle of medicine; and some clothes and grub from the trader. He thought it out as quickly as possible, bringing to bear on the problem what little remained of his schooling.

"Two hundred dollars, just now," he decided desperately.

"And three hundred more for the team of work horses," said the major decisively.

"I don't need those horses."

"Well, you do need things for the home. Are you never to have a home with comforts in it? Did Medicine Bear, your father, buy that house to have it stand empty, his son with no idea of civilization?"

"What do I need?" asked Yellow Dog, his eyes narrowing.

"Every man should have a furnished home. That's why you went to school and learned to talk English, that you might take your place in the community. Your house stands nearly empty. You had a bed and table, a stove and two chairs, when I last visited it. That's all I saw in your home. It hasn't the atmosphere. Look about you—see your neighbors. There's your aunt, Pretty Woman. She buys things."

"Well, anyway, I don't want those horses."

"All right. We'll pass the horses for the present. Now, when this sale is completed, you will want two hundred dollars in cash. What for?"

"Oh, for clothes, and grub, and those other things."

"And do you plan to buy anything for the home?"

"Oh, yes!" yielded Yellow Dog. "You

say I should have them. But can I get the two hundred dollars now?"

"Perhaps, seeing that you are becoming reasonable and showing some sense; yes, you may draw two hundred dollars. Sign the application. And you really should have those work horses, and when you come home tired, you should have something of a cheerful home atmosphere."

Yellow Dog did not read the list of his needs, but scrawled his signature at the foot of them. While he was having the usual trouble with the pen, two clerks were called to witness the agreement.

He was glad when that was over. He recalled that Philip Sunrise had acted stubbornly, and could not get his money to this day.

Yellow Dog chuckled to himself. He had found the way to own a car, and next he would find a way to make Youngest Child produce a bottle from the underbrush retreats of the brakes. Youngest Child wanted money, too.

As for those things required in his home, he wasted little time in wondering what they would prove to be—something like the tools, bought years ago, and now rusty, or that screen stuff for the windows. True, the screen kept the flies from coming in at the windows; but when the days were hot, stifling, and the thick haze arose from the river bottoms, they would come in at the door, whole swarms of them, because one had to leave the door open if the windows were half shut with wires. That was the trouble with houses. In summer, one should have a tepee.

Who wanted to live in a house, anyway? Another white man's notion. Even a store-bought tent of canvas was better, for when the ground around it became littered and soiled, one could move a tent the same as a tepee to a cleaner place. And when all the land had been open and free to his people, they were satisfied with tepees.

Now a man was staked out on a certain piece of land, fenced, hard, and fast, as a pony is tethered. A house was a rope stake, and the man pivoted about it, never getting away. Medicine Bear, his father, had told him that when he taught him the song.

"These white men are slaves to their possessions," said the old chief. "Only their soldiers are free to come and go quickly. But, when the war is over, they seize a piece of land and become squaws. And

they always fence up the land, for they do not trust each other."

Yellow Dog took the check that a clerk made out for him. He cashed it at the trader's, stuffed the bills into his pocket, and turned a deaf ear to all invitations to purchase things on display. At the door an old woman of the tribe, seeing his wealth, asked him for a dollar to buy "black medicine," else she would have no coffee until ration day. He grumbled a little, but slipped a bill from the roll.

"He is a good son," said the woman when she made her purchase.

"A tightwad," growled the trader, glaring after him.

Just then a bell began clanging furiously at the Agency, and soon there came the roar of a motor. The fire truck was going out. Men clambered into it from the rear.

Yellow Dog, tired as he was, made a run, coughing, and caught the end, too. Prairie fires were exciting, something like a battle, and he was always ready to fight them, the last of the people's enemies that could be faced and throttled.

III

Two weeks later, Yellow Dog possessed experience and little else. The secondhand car no longer ran easily, with a springing motion, for the two rear wheels were mangled, and they bumped and jounced over the hard roads. The trader wanted fifty dollars for tires and repairs. And whereas work horses required hay and attention, this iron car was thirsty for costly fluids.

When oil called for more cash, Yellow Dog experimented without it. Then the whole mechanism turned red hot and stuck fast. He took the crooked handle and cranked himself into exhaustion. The engine would not cough at all, but Yellow Dog coughed a great deal. Finally, trembling with weakness, he left it by the roadside to rust.

Forced back on original methods, he roped a friend's pony and went visiting. Just before sunset, Yellow Dog threw himself wearily off the horse at his aunt's home.

Now, his aunt was reputed to be a rich woman. Once her means would have been fixed by the number of ponies grazing on the range; but those times had passed. It now happened that she was wealthy after another fashion. She had borne children, and they were dead. So she had no trouble in selling their lands and keeping herself in

money. The traders gladly took her cash, and encouraged her to accept credit between sales and disbursements.

But she held to some of the old customs, and preferred to live in a tepee in summer. Behind it stood a better house than most settlers owned. It had a cement foundation, and could not be moved from place to place, and, therefore, was not dragged to pieces. A tinkle of music sounded from the house as Yellow Dog, trailing his rope and coughing, came to the tepee fire.

Her hospitality, as expressed in food, was unstinted; but, aside from this welcome of the board, he felt that she viewed him with some suspicion. And this was thoroughly developed when he mentioned a loan.

"Money! Always money!" she exclaimed, petulantly. Was it not enough that her old man went to the traders, buying everything that took his fancy, and charging it all to her account? How could she afford to lend money, when times were so hard, and it was necessary to buy so many costly things?

Yellow Dog listened patiently, and with due respect for his elder relative, for when she started she ran the gamut of petty reflections and grievances. She invited his attention to the condition of shiftless males who spent their time visiting, while their lands lay idle and their ponies ran slick of branding and starved in the brakes.

"What do you want money for?" she asked, finally.

"That car I bought of Youngest Child, it became very hot, and stuck fast. I must have it fixed. It is in the ditch."

"One of those iron wagons that do not need ponies!" she sneered. "Well, it can go without fixing, and the better for you. Have you forgot how to ride? You remind me of Amos Night Hawk, who bought one of those cars from O'Brien, after O'Brien got it from somebody who did not need two. And he could hardly see to drive it, so bad are his eyes from the dust trouble. Now he's afoot. But who am I to speak loudly of fools? Listen!"

Again Yellow Dog heard the music from the house—a familiar, meaningless air:

Tum, tum, tumpety umpety, tum, tum, tum.

It was the very same tune he had heard at the Agency.

"How can I lend you money to fix burning cars, when I have to get such things for

the home?" she asked. "We have to make a home in this new way. I do not understand the sense of it, just as I could not see why my old man should go to that white man's voting dance. But he voted, and now he is taxed. These things for the home, you buy them, and next month comes a paper for taxes. I must see about those taxes. The major should have told me."

Yellow Dog also possessed one of the unnecessary and altogether uncomfortable things spoken of as "a home." Uneasy thoughts came to his mind.

"Why did you buy that music thing?" he asked her.

"Because I was told," she snapped.

"What did you pay for it, mother?"

"Enough," she rattled on. "If you had money, you could have one of these boxes that make white man's music. You have a home, but you do not live in it half the time. Always wandering and borrowing. Did I not see you last ration day at Blue Bonnet's camp? Yes—until his meat and coffee were gone, and then you followed Hooting Owl."

"I have money," he boasted, impatiently, "only I cannot get it all at one time—and if I did get it, I would not buy a song box."

The old woman stopped, silenced for a moment. She stared at Yellow Dog accusingly.

"So! You have sold Quail Woman's land?"

"I have," he replied with some heat.

She regarded him solemnly, her expression having in it something of pity. She shook her head.

"Well, you will have to buy things for the home," she said.

Tumpety umpety, tum, tum, tum, came the mechanical refrain.

The constant repetition angered Yellow Dog.

"Why don't you stop that thing?" he cried. "Or have it play something different."

"There is only one song," she explained wearily. "It will stop soon—but then the old man will wind it up again. I always hope it is broken when it stops. Things for the home! Now, if it was like the one the major bought last week, that runs by a wire when the Agency lights jump up, my old man would not have to sit there and wind it. He could be out fixing that

broken mower, and I would not have to pay another man to fix it. But they said I could not have a wire out here, away from the Agency. If these things for the home need wires, why could I not have a wire, too?"

"So you bought it from him," sneered Yellow Dog.

"You mean—from the major? Oh, no! I have never bought anything from the major. A man came in a red car, and he said that the major wanted me to have it. Six hundred dollars I paid for it, and what is the use of it I cannot tell. Perhaps it will bring me good luck when the land is gone, and the money, too. That is the evil of getting money for land. When we owned no pieces of land, and had no money, there were tepees and ponies, and there was game in the country then."

"Those were good times," Yellow Dog remarked.

"Yes, we would go about, place to place, from the river to the mountains, and south in the winter to where a woman would not freeze. Now, in winter, we have to stay on these hills; and who could drag heavy houses and song boxes around? There's Joe War Cry, who works at the Agency. His song box is standing in the schoolhouse, and Leaping Elk has one of them at the fair grounds. I asked him why he bought it. For his children, he said. The song boxes will be old and crippled before the children come back from school in the north. And Joe War Cry has no children. If you want things for the home, Yellow Dog, you can buy Joe War Cry's song box. It cost three hundred dollars, and I heard him offer it to a white man for fifty. But fifty dollars is better than a thing you cannot carry, and have no place for."

"I have no use for a song box," said Yellow Dog. "But why didn't the white man buy it, if they are worth so much?"

"The white man just laughed, and he said to Joe: 'What you get from the boss, you keep.' And he said, also: 'There is a law about this buying, and I don't want to go to jail.'"

"That's true," Yellow Dog commented. "We can buy from the white men if the major says 'all right,' but we cannot sell those same things back to a white man."

The old woman laughed mirthlessly.

"Did a white man ever ask you to sell them back?"

"Everything changes," said Yellow Dog.

"No two of these majors are alike. There was that mean one. We could sell nothing but hay, and buy nothing but tools and grub."

"A mean chief is like having a strict father," said the old woman. "We had good crops then. The cold weather came, but there was food in the house and hay in the stack. The ponies were fat. And did that mean one sell Red Shield a machine for plowing when Red Shield had no land to plow? And did he let Night Hawk buy an iron wagon that cost more than ten wooden ones? When Night Hawk and his wife finished paying for that car, there was nothing left of their money. They will have to sell more land now."

She stared into the fire for a little, and then the mood of reminiscence again seized her.

"In the old days, when we camped after the game, there were no men with coughs tearing them, like your father, Medicine Bear. He died of a cough. He did not get it until we came to this new way of living, with homes and things in them. We used to sew them up in buffalo hides when they died. Now we get a box, with silver on it, from O'Brien, and sometimes the box is on the road before the man dies."

"I have seen this," Yellow Dog agreed.

"Then comes old Major Tompkins to sell a rock for the grave, like they put over your father, Yellow Dog. What is that rock for—to show the buzzards where he sleeps? Your brother bought it when they sold the land. And you have a cough, too, Yellow Dog. The white medicine man at the Agency will give you some oil for it."

"I do not like that oil," he said. "It makes me turn from my food."

"Bring it to me to tan hides with, then," she advised.

Just then the tinkle of the piano ceased, and a rustling whirring sound came from the house.

"The old man is winding it up," she explained. "He plays it all day long. But he will break it soon, perhaps."

Yellow Dog said nothing. Promptly the tune began again:

Tum, tum, tumpety umpety, tum, tum, tum.

It was a thick, hot night. The air hung around one as a warm garment. Yellow Dog had eaten his fill of the old woman's food, and he knew that she would never give him money until the novelty and the

curse of the music had worn off. He was wasting time.

His cough was racking him cruelly. He knew there was a bottle safely cached in his house, and he had used it sparingly. He would go home—anywhere to get away from that ever-sounding racket that ruined the night's peace.

A noise like that under the white, glaring lights of the town, with the people restlessly thronging up and down, idle, laughing, seemed all right and merry enough; but, on the quiet hills, with a handful of stars in the sky, and the murmur of the river below the bluff, it held something of mockery, something akin to the jeering chatter of the prairie jackal. There was nothing of strength in it, nothing of men and action, like the voice of the big drum.

Yellow Dog flung his leg across the saddle, and the pony turned toward the black and baking plains. Behind him the music tinkled, and "things for the home" kept running through his head as long as he could hear it. It would never do to be without money again, thought Yellow Dog, for Quail Woman's land was gone now, and she had borne no children.

IV

YELLOW DOG had proceeded several miles along the dusty trail that wound over the hills, when there came to him a faint sound not unlike the music he had hoped to outdistance—but more rapid, having an impelling call to it. He pulled the pony up and listened. It was a bell, ringing. Not the bell at the church, for that had a doleful sound. This was a demanding clangor, hurried notes, a signal, although it came faint and mellow through the quiet air. The fire bell!

Turning his mount's head, he drummed his heels into its ribs, and with shouts urged it toward the highest ground. There he pulled in the blowing pony, his own lungs laboring from the effort. All around a huge void of black covered the earth, a nuggy curtain pressing down on the hills, feebly lighted by the score of stronger stars. But there—in the far east—low down, appeared a brighter line, a thin film of reflected light. Now it gleamed yellow at a point, and quickly died away again.

The hammer of hoofs along a near-by road, and the roar of a car with its horn honking like a wild goose from the great river, told him that others were on the way.

Fire! It was in the Gray Hills district, and not a long way from his own place. Yellow Dog yelled to hearten the pony, and raced for it.

He took the shorter trails across the long rolling hills, while on the roads he could hear the roar of cars and more of the wild honking. It must be a big fire, and spreading fast, for so many were turning out to it. Now the whole sky in the east flared crimson, an angry glow, like a smear of blood across the quiet country, like a menace of war and a threat of disaster.

Soon Yellow Dog could see black objects shadowed against this lurid screen. Now it was one of those high-peaked houses, now a stack of hay that soon would be gone. Trees showed their dark laces against the flushing sky.

Now he passed empty cars by the roadside, waiting for those who were fighting on ahead, and who would return either to run from or to follow the fire, depending on its wild vagaries. Fortunately, there was little wind this night. Only a faint breath of air at times touched Yellow Dog's hot face.

From the next rise, overlooking a wide flat, he saw the searing line of the fire itself, a livid scar across the prairie, with at one place a house blazing. Like a glowing snake, burning its way across the dark, the fire crept and writhed.

There was a truck in an open space. That would be the Agency fire wagon, where he could get a wet sack for his fighting equipment. There was one man, watching, as he rode up.

"Who's that?" called the man. "Ho! Yellow Dog! You're the fire fighter, always. Grab a sack and get off there with Martin. See him? There he is—fall in behind him, Yellow Dog!"

The black form of a man showed, crouching, against the yellow light of the furnace. Now Yellow Dog could see other figures, hurrying up and down the line of fire, painted against it one moment as dancers about a ceremonial pyre, then lost in the black again. Yellow Dog caught up a pair of dripping sacks, and moved out to join them.

The man Martin waved him toward a place in the line where others were preparing to back fire a space. Now came a puff of wind that swept the red menace forward with a great leap; then it cooled again, to burn slowly, sullenly. Without a wind,

they could back fire it, and perhaps beat it into submission.

So Yellow Dog fell to, coughing at times when the smoke enveloped him, but holding grimly to his part of the work. He wiped his smudgy face with the wet sack, and once, after racing down the long line, he coughed long and desperately, but for all that there was a feeling of delight in this night adventure.

Except for times like this, his people had long ceased doing anything that resembled fighting. Perhaps his father, old Medicine Bear, had felt such an elation when they stormed against Custer's line of desperate soldiers.

Once or twice he felt a weakness come over him, after steady effort in tearing grass, and beating the sacks as if they were flails, and rushing from place to place—and then he thought of the bottle hidden in his house. He would not be far from home and comfort, once they had this devouring devil subdued, and even now it was reaching the burned-over spaces they had prepared for it.

Another hour passed before that breathing time came to him. The chart of the stars had swung about before any one felt free to call out that the fight was over. Gradually, by twos and threes, the smoke-grimed men drew off from their different sectors, and reported to the man at the truck. And then cars began chugging homeward, followed by the odors of burnt grasses and charred timber.

Long Horse had lost his house and outfit, save those few things they had dragged from his dooryard, and they had succeeded in choking the fire close to the home of White Chief.

Yellow Dog went looking for his pony, but it had strayed off, and he was too tired and weak to follow. It was only a short distance across the hill to his own place. And, if White Chief's people had been at home, instead of visiting in the north, he could have had a cup of coffee at least. It would have been comforting.

Suddenly he stopped. Suppose the fire had swept away White Chief's house! There would have been a pretty howl next ration day, for White Chief was the keeper of the big drum!

A ration day without the tribal dance—without the big drum, and four men solemnly beating it!

Yellow Dog looked around him. There

was no sign of fire now. Only pungent smoke came on the little wind that cooled his hot face. There was no one to see him. It would never do to have the drum burned, and another fire might threaten it. Yellow Dog turned back toward White Chief's house. He would make sure of the drum's safety. A ration day without the big drum!

An hour later he slipped covertly from the shadow of trees behind his own house, and crossed the little clearing hurriedly to his door. On his back was something that cast a grotesque shadow. The late moon now threw a little light into the open spaces. The ground appeared silvery.

Then Yellow Dog paused at the sight of many tracks. Some one—several—had come to the house with a wagon. It was not often that he had visitors. But he must get the drum inside first, and investigate afterward. There was now a rising wind through the trees. Suppose that wind had been earlier, he thought—there would have been no drum. One of his screens was loose, and it rattled and whined at him. "Things for the home," he thought, and grinned.

V

BUT when Yellow Dog entered the little three-roomed house, he quickly forgot these screens. Something had changed during his absence. Some one had visited him, and something had not been taken away. There was a bulky object on the dark side of the first room, a wisp of moonlight from the window showing it, black and ominous.

Yellow Dog made haste to light his lamp. The floor was tracked with the marks of many feet, and there was a rough scrape on the boards, as if something heavy had been dragged. And there stood the thing itself. A black, shining object, it covered more than half the wall. He ran his hand over its smooth surfaces.

"Things for the home!" he muttered, sullenly.

Then he turned about to look at the drum in the room's center. He looked from one to the other. Slowly he crossed to the kitchen of the house and sought a loose board in the floor. From under it he produced the bottle.

He came back into the front room, and stood, thinking, undecided for the moment. He was tired and smudgy from the labors of the night. He was weak and hungry,

too. But the bottle would cure all that quickly; much quicker than would food. Then he took a gulp of the raw, fiery liquor, and at once began coughing and shuddering. For a moment he gasped and choked. Then another swallow, and another, and the coughing grew less while a feeling of warmth spread all through him. And as slowly an insolent anger burned him, too.

"Things for the home!" he repeated, snarling.

A swift wave of rebellion passed over him. He would finish with the contents of the bottle, and when it was empty he would crash it into the polished face of that good-for-nothing piece of white man's folly. It represented hundreds of dollars from Quail Woman's land. He sat down, growling like a wild beast, trapped; for had not this silent thing trapped him?

The wind was blowing in short gusts now, as if preceding a rain, and the old screens of the house flapped and rattled, but he paid no attention. Here was something to engage his thought, and fire was running through his veins, and his head ached and throbbed.

Unsteadily, Yellow Dog got to his feet and approached his legacy. He ran his hands over the polished front, and something slipped beneath his fingers. There came a whirring sound, and a sharp ripple of thin notes.

As if stung, Yellow Dog sprang backward, raising the bottle to defend himself. His head was whirring, too, and his feet stumbling. Half dazed, only half comprehending what was happening, he stood there waiting, panting, listening, weaving, swaying.

And it, the voice of the thing there was a jeering lilt:

Tum, tum, tumpety umpety, tum, tum, tum.

Yellow Dog sneered, and then his wild laughter rang through the house. Here, in his own house, was that same meaningless chatter he had heard so often—first in the town, then at the Agency under the trees, and only a few hours ago at his aunt's house. So he drank off all the liquor in a hasty, furious gulping, and then hurled the bottle at the clattering, clucking thing before him.

A crash and a splintering of glassware followed, but the music did not cease. The mocking noise of it continued, like a slap in his face, a jeer at his weakness, his cough-

ing, the hunger that would follow, his poverty, his helplessness, and the lost price of Quail Woman's land.

Angry, raging, his head painfully aching, his hands and body dripping with cold sweat, he made a few unsteady steps and sank weakly to the floor, beaten for the moment, an object of ridicule. He made an impotent gesture, and his hand struck the tribe's drum. A low note sounded, something like a growl.

Uttering half choked words, possessed by a drunken thought, Yellow Dog struggled to his knees. He felt for the rawhide lacings, for the heavy sticks that were there, and, drawing them from the thong loops, he flourished them about his head.

Savagely he brought the hammers down on the drum's head. A heavy boom answered, hoarse, massive, drowning the tinkling noises of the other instrument. It was such a sullen crashing as had in the old days been heard across the Dakota hills before the dawn charge.

Then he fell to beating furiously. He would crush out this white man's mockery. As one age challenging another, the thunder of the old savage gods roared down the mocking rhythm.

And Yellow Dog began a chant in time with his drumming, the war song he had learned from old Medicine Bear, his father, who had charged at the head of his braves against Custer. Louder he raised the song, a hymn of hatred, and heavier spoke the drum's voice against the shallow whimper of the strings.

Yellow Dog never noticed that the room grew lighter in tone—more light than his

smudgy oil lamp could throw. He did not hear an ominous crackle in the thicket. The trees were rustling as if afraid. There was a swift leap of something red among the dried and withering bunch grass of the little clearing, a puff of smoke from the stack of old wood at the kitchen door.

But Yellow Dog, his head confused and throbbing, heard nothing but his own war-time chant and the thunder echo of his tribal gods. His stupefied brain sensed only the struggle that he imagined was taking place between the two symbols, the one of battle and revenge, the other of trickery and cowardice.

The wind whipped the trees, and a crimson flame burst through them to fasten on the sun-dried boards of the little frame house. Tiny glowworms crept into and along its crevices.

Still there sounded heavy throbs of the big drum, and to the crouching beater there came crowded visions of old warriors, shadowy beings, robed and feathered, back to fight for their land. Yellow Dog's arms arose and fell with a weary, mechanical, half-conscious effort now, and his weakened, poisoned body drooped lower and lower. He stopped chanting—his blows came slower, lighter—

A thick wave of smoke followed, and he sank down slowly to the floor, his thin arms embracing the vibrating sides of the big drum as its last hoarse murmur died away.

A few moments later the partitions of the house began to roar like a furnace. Then a long tongue of flame touched the moving paper roll of the mechanical piano, and hushed it.

THE SOLDIER

NIGHT shadows fall within the small café,
The leaves outside are glistening, wet with rain,
Upon the walls a candle throws its ray—
A violin intones a low refrain.

Beside a window, sipping yellow wine,
A girl sits with a red rose in her hair,
Around a soldier's hands her fingers twine—
White curtains flutter in the darkening air.

Here he is far from drums and cannon fumes
Where he has wine, a woman's eyes and laughter,
And songs, mauve silks and smoke, lights and perfumes.
All things he loves and will remember after
When on the roadway, marching some cold night,
Her face will haunt him in the faint starlight.

Antonia Y. Schwab

Without Label

HIGH COURAGE CARRIED THIS WOMAN, HEAD ERECT, TO FACE
A SITUATION EQUAL TO A TRIAL BY FIRE

By Clough McQuinn

THE manner of my meeting Jerry left no chance of forgetting him. I was driving my recently acquired runabout down a side street in an effort to avoid congested traffic. It was pay night for me, and I had all of my two weeks' salary and a bit of left-over change in my purse on the seat beside me.

I was speeding along, feeling grateful for the prosperity that enabled me to ride home in my own cozy car, when, just in front of me, two men left the sidewalk to cross the street. One came toward me, and the other went forward at an angle that would take him directly in front of my car. I tried to swerve past him, but he seemed, purposely, to get in my way.

I had to slow down, and then I realized that the other man had jumped on the running board of my car, and was demanding my purse. I was scared to death. I could feel myself turning to stone. What I did was not due to presence of mind. It was an accident born of fright. My little secondhand car was equipped with a siren, and in my panic I pressed on the siren button instead of the brake. It was a good, loud siren, I'll say that for it. To my startled ears it sounded like the much promised last trump, and I guess the young holdup felt the same way.

"Shut that off, you damn flapper," he commanded.

But I was paralyzed, and couldn't move. The car ran along slowly, and the siren wailed. Doors on each side of the street opened, and people ran out. The holdup man swore, and reached into the car for my purse. Just then a young god in blue overalls appeared from nowhere and lifted the bandit bodily off the running board and held him, squirming and swearing, but helpless. I recovered my wits and stopped

the car. The crowd closed in. A policeman elbowed his way through to us.

"What's the trouble?" he demanded.

"Here's the trouble, officer," my rescuer answered, presenting the struggling bandit. "As neat a little holdup as you'd wish to see, and almost successful."

The policeman took the culprit in charge, and requested my name and address, which he wrote in his book, and instructed me to come into court when I should be notified, and to make formal charges against my bold assailant.

My blue-overalled rescuer removed his cap from a mop of shining black hair, and asked me if he might pilot my car out of the mob. I was glad to accept his offer, partly because I really was still nervous and unstrung, and, though I hardly allowed myself to admit it, I wanted to see more of this young man. He was different from the marcelled young near-sheiks who wandered in and out of my office. The hand that held the cap was smudged with black. His face, too, was streaked with the same black, but his eyes were clear, and looked straight and clean.

I moved over, and he got in and took the wheel. When we had left the crowd behind, he continued driving, talking of the holdup, and how fortunate it was that I had not lost my money.

"I'm not so sure," I bantered. "It looks as though I have lost my car and all."

He gave me a side glance from friendly blue eyes. "Do you feel like that?" he asked.

"No, but I ought to. I don't know who you are."

"Jerry Foster, at your service, madam," he replied with as near a bow as he could accomplish in the limited space of the small car. "I haven't a card in my dress suit."

He indicated, with a glance, his overalls. "But you'll take the word of 'a honest woikin' man,' won't you?"

I laughed my acceptance. "But I haven't said my 'thank you' yet. Of course you know that I—that—"

"Yes, I know. Forget the gratitude stuff. I got a great kick out of it, and am already overpaid. And this is your street, isn't it?"

"How did you know?" I asked in real surprise.

"Wasn't I listening when the cop was getting your name and address? Here we are. It's been a wonderful adventure. I wish it might lead on. Could I see you again some time? Would you go somewhere with me?"

"I'll do better than that. I'll ask you to come in and let me introduce dad and mother to the hero who rescued their 'che-ild.'"

"No, you don't," he grinned. "You'd find your hero sneakin' down the alley."

"Oh, all right, come in, and we'll leave off the hero stuff."

"Not to-night; not in my dress suit."

"Why not? Father works, and so do I."

"Yes, but I'd rather meet your folks right, the first time. If you'll let me come to-morrow evening? You see, I am in the ironworks. I was on my way home. Iron's pretty dirty, but it's interesting. Iron's about the most necessary thing in this old world, and it's only in its infancy." He stopped, kind of breathless, and looked to see if I understood.

"Needless to say you are interested in iron, eh?" I helped out.

"I sure am. You said to-morrow?"

"Yes, if you'd rather."

"That's that, then, and thank you." He swung off down the street, tall and straight, with head up and eyes searching for worlds to conquer.

II

You can guess I was ready to fall in love with Jerry Foster, if, indeed, I had not already done so. My family fell for him almost as hard as I did, and my family is hard to please in the matter of my men friends. It was at my birthday dinner, a few weeks after I met Jerry, that they completely capitulated, though for a time things didn't look so good.

Mother had asked me whom I wanted for my guest, it being one of our family

customs that we have our most special friend for our birthday dinner.

"Oh, just Jerry, I guess," I answered mother in what I believed was an offhand and indifferent manner. But mother smiled in a way that showed I hadn't put anything over on her with my nonchalant air.

Being a birthday dinner, we naturally fell to talking of birthdays, and my kid brother asked Jerry when his birthday came.

Jerry hesitated rather long before he answered, "I don't have any."

"What's the idea? Are you another *Topsy*, just growed up in a co'nfield?" I bantered.

He flushed, and got redder and redder, and kept his eyes on his plate.

"Maybe you're an April fool?" I guessed.

He raised his head ever so little, and gave me just a wisp of a glance out of the most miserable eyes I ever saw. No one spoke. Jerry had to say something.

"I haven't any birthday. I really haven't. I know it sounds foolish, but it isn't my fault. I can't help it."

It did sound foolish, and Jerry looked so unhappy. There was a silence, the kind that happens when there has been a conversational head-on collision. It seemed to last an awful while. Then Jerry blurted out, like a big boy ready to groan:

"It's true, I haven't any birthday. I don't know when I was born. I don't know who I am. The Custer Street Orphanage in St. Louis is the only home I ever had. Times like this, when I see real folks—families, brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers who belong together, and have birthdays and all, why, I—I—it sort of gets me."

You should have seen my family fall all over Jerry. Mother left her place, and came around and kissed him, and called him her dear boy. Dad blew his nose, and reached over and slapped Jerry on the back, and my kid brother just stared and said, "Oh, gee!"

Later in the evening, when Jerry and I sat, all cozy, before the gas grate, Jerry said: "I brought you a birthday present, but I am afraid to offer it to you, because the label has been lost."

"Why, Jerry, how funny you are! As if a label made any difference."

"Well, most things, even people, are valued by the name they're labeled with;

it sort of establishes their identity, you know."

"Oh, you mean—" I started, and choked on the question.

"Yes, that I want to give you—myself, but how can I when I don't know who I am nor where I came from?"

"As if I cared. You are you, and you came to me."

I was sitting so close to Jerry that he had only to reach out and take me in his arms.

We had three perfect years. We were buying a little home, and baby Dessie was just learning to balance herself on her fat little legs and shout "Da-da," whenever Jerry appeared. Jerry said he had solved the problem of being in two places at once. When he was at home with us, his mind was at his work, and when he was at the works, his heart was with Dessie and me.

He was doing experimental work on the combining of metals, which, he said, would revolutionize the whole iron industry. At last he secured the results he had been working for, and his discovery was written up in the papers, with his picture and all the things he had done to find out this wonderful secret of combination. I was so proud of Jerry.

I had put on the roast for dinner, and was calculating that it would be just nicely done by the time Jerry came, when the doorbell rang. Nothing warned me that it might be the death knell to our happiness. I opened the door, and there, on our little front porch, was a woman with two small boys. She was young, and would have been pretty, if she had not looked so worn and unhappy. She had a newspaper in her hand with Jerry's picture folded out.

"Good afternoon," I greeted her.

"How do you do?" she responded in a weary, joyless voice. "Does this man," holding up the pictured paper, "live here?"

"Yes, he is my husband."

"I want to see him," she said.

"He will not be home till six. What is it you want?" I asked.

"I want to—to see him. Could I wait here for him?"

I am city bred, and I do not invite strangers into my house.

"Couldn't you call again, or leave a message?" I suggested.

The woman fumbled the paper, and stood undecided.

"I have come far, and the children are tired—" She stopped, looked again at Jerry's picture in the paper. "How long have you been married to—to him—this man?" she asked.

"Nearly three years," I answered, before I realized her impertinence. I was wondering in an uneasy way what it was she could want of Jerry. "The man, whose picture you have there, is Jerry Foster, as you can see by the article below the picture," I explained coldly.

"Yes, I know. I read it, but that isn't his name. He is Joe Stiger. He is my husband, the father of my two boys."

I must have stared at her with open mouth, stricken dumb.

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "I know how you must feel." But she didn't, for I wasn't feeling; not even thinking. The world had gone blank, and only a thundering echo of her words went on and on through the whole of my throbbing body. I gave myself a mental shake, and cautioned myself that this woman must not see that I was at all impressed by her assertion.

"You are mistaken." I hoped I spoke firmly. "Mr. Foster has lived here more than three years. He is very well known."

"It is more than four years since he left me and the children. I have not seen him since, but this is his picture, here in this paper. I have found him."

"But he can't be your husband." I wasn't frightened, but my knees quivered under me, and I wished I might sit down. "He can't be," I reiterated, vacuously.

"Will you let me stay to meet him and hear him deny it, if he can?" the woman asked.

"Yes. Oh, yes, I'll phone for him to come right home."

"No, don't," she advised. "If he is put on his guard he might run away again. I have had such difficulty finding him. I don't want to do it all over again."

I let the woman in. I had no thought of being afraid of her any more, not in the way of being afraid of a strange woman. She was now something intimate and near that I had to face and overcome.

III

We sat in my little parlor, eying each other, trying to be courteous; but I was dying of anxiety and heartache. Perhaps the other woman was, too. She looked unhappy enough, but her unhappiness was of

long standing, and she was used to it. While I—but of course it wasn't true.

She looked about the cozy room. "He has made a nice home for you," she said; "better than he ever made for me. He never would work, always trifling with some impossible invention. He was going to invent some kind of a bullet-proof metal."

Bullet-proof metal! I felt like a bullet had gone through my heart. That was one of Jerry's dreams.

She said I mustn't think she was seeking to avenge her wrongs. Nothing could eradicate the suffering and neglect she had experienced, and not for worlds would she take Joe back. No, what she wanted was that he should provide for the two little boys. She wasn't able to earn enough for their support.

"Yes, of course," I agreed. "Their father, whoever he is, ought to care for them." To myself I said: "Of course it wasn't Jerry. It couldn't be."

Never would I forget Jerry's delight when little Dessie came, the brand-new exultation of ownership that he displayed; how tenderly he held his little new daughter in his strong arms, and said, as if too wonderful to be true, "My own, my very own! A family all my own!" He couldn't have felt like that if he had experienced fatherhood twice before. No, my Jerry was not the father of those two children.

When Dessie woke, and I brought her out, Mrs. Stiger remarked how like Joe, meaning my Jerry, she looked, and how like her little Ray, too. And she did. She had the same deep blue, heavily lashed eyes, and the same little quirky mouth. My heart was a dead weight in my breast, and those two babies smiled at each other beneath our tragic questioning eyes.

I was beginning to feel stretched to the snapping point when I heard Jerry's quick step on the porch, and he came rushing eagerly into the room, as he always did. Then he stopped, seeing the strangers. Were they strangers to him? Somewhere inside of me the question formed itself. Jerry stood, expecting me to introduce my company. The woman got up and waited for him to recognize her, but Jerry only smiled politely, indifferently, and waited for me to tell him who she was.

"The lady thinks she knows you, Jerry," I said, coming to the rescue.

"Sorry," Jerry apologized, "but I don't recall having met you."

Not the slightest flicker of embarrassment or sign of recognition! The tension around my heart eased a little.

"Joe, how can you say that?" the woman cried. "You need not fear that I shall try to hold you. I don't want you. I'll be glad to divorce you. You can marry this woman, or anybody. I thought it would be Elsie Grant I would find you with. What did you do with her?"

"Madam, I don't know what you are talking about. I never saw you before, and I never heard of Elsie Grant."

"Don't, Joe, it isn't any use." She picked up the youngest of her two boys, who looked so much like Dessie and like Jerry, too. "You can't deny your own flesh and blood, Joe. It isn't for myself that I've come to you. It's the children. They need things that I can't earn enough to get. It isn't right that they should suffer, Joe."

"Madam," Jerry interrupted. "You have made a mistake. You're all worked up over a fancied resemblance. Lots of people look alike, though I hate to think I look like the kind of a man your husband must have been."

Mrs. Stiger stood undecided in the face of Jerry's certain denial. "I have proofs," she said at last. "Papers and pictures, and there are people who know us, where we lived in St. Louis."

In St. Louis! That was where Jerry came from! But what this woman said couldn't be true. Oh, it couldn't be!

"If there are any people in St. Louis who know me, they know I was never married there. Why, I was only fourteen when I left there," Jerry told her.

"You must have been fourteen when Ray was born, then," she sneered, "for it was then that you left me. It's no use, Joe, you can't deny your own children; and your father and mother, Joe, have you forgotten them?"

"I never had a father nor a mother; that is, I never knew them, and I never had any children except Dessie, here."

"Why, Joe Stiger!" the woman gasped.

Jerry looked perplexed and annoyed at her attempts to claim him. He evidently felt sorry for her, too, so small and tired, and the wondering-eyed little boys clinging to her skirts. Jerry is the kindest-hearted man alive. He looked as if he would like to remember the poor little mother just to help her out.

Mrs. Stiger could see that she wasn't accomplishing anything. She said she would go, now, and would try to think what was best to do. She said if Joe, meaning my Jerry, remained where he was, she would take no immediate legal steps, but if he went away, she would at once put her case in the hands of the law. He need not promise to stay or not to stay, because she knew him too well to trust his word.

When she was gone, Jerry and I stood and looked at each other. In some way Jerry looked different. He caught me watching him, and came and took my face in his big strong hands and looked straight into my eyes. "Atha," he said, "do you believe that woman? Do you believe I ever saw or heard of her before?"

"Why, Jerry, why—" But I couldn't look at him. I just buried my face against his broad shoulder and cried. Baby Dessie raised her voice and wept, too, and we both turned to pacify her.

"When do we eat?" Jerry asked when Dessie was smiling again.

I turned to the neglected dinner that I had started so happily. "This is such an awful thing to happen just now." I began talking, to cover the queer feeling of distance that had come between Jerry and me. "Just when success was coming to you. The effect will be almost as bad as if it were true. People do so love a scandal."

"I'll say they do. For all my big discovery the papers give me a measly column. For this story I'll bet they'd give me scare-heads and half a page."

"Oh, Jerry!"

"Don't you worry. This woman won't get far. She probably wants money and—"

"Jerry, couldn't we buy her off? Couldn't we? We mustn't let her talk."

"We could not," Jerry said decisively; "not unless you want me to acknowledge that her story is true. No, what I'll do is to write back to Pittsburgh and to New York, where I worked, and get letters proving I was there. I'll do that right now, and then we'll just lay low here until I get the answers."

Jerry wrote his letters, and pushed his chair back. "It's going to be hard to find people who know enough about me to help out any. That's part of the penalty of having no family and being a wanderer. I've never made close friends. When fellows learn you have no folks, that even the name

you bear was picked up and grafted onto you, why, they look at you like you were a new kind of a fish."

"Well, that ought to work both ways. It ought to be as hard for this woman to prove who you are as for you to prove who you are not."

"You are a great little consoler," Jerry smiled at me.

IV

MRS. STIGER came again to see us. She brought pictures of the home in St. Louis, where they had lived; pictures of the children and of Joe—or was it Jerry? It didn't seem possible any one else could have stood before the camera for those pictures.

Jerry insisted he had never seen the pictures, and, besides, he was in Pittsburgh at the time she said they were taken.

"No," Mrs. Stiger contradicted, "it was to Pittsburgh that you went when you left with Elsie Grant. Mrs. Grant had a letter from Elsie from there."

Elsie Grant again! I searched Jerry's face for the guilt that surely should be there if he had known Elsie Grant, but there was no sign, no concern, not even interest. Besides, Jerry had not the look of a man who ever had Elsie Grants in his life. I doubt if anything can obliterate the indelible mark an Elsie Grant puts on a man.

Mrs. Stiger left us again, with the repeated half threat, half promise to take no legal action as long as Jerry remained where he was.

A week went by, and no replies came to Jerry's letters; ten days, and still nothing. Jerry tried to be cheerful and pretend that all was as usual, and I tried to carry out the pretense, but all the time that woman was in my mind, and Jerry knew it, and I knew he knew it. It was a time of crackling high tension, as if at any moment the crossed wires would touch and our lives go dark with the fuse of love blown out.

Every hour of every day, and many of the hours of the night, I worried and wondered and questioned till I got jumpy and fretful. At last I decided to go to St. Louis, where all this had started, and see what I could learn. Two things I could do that would relieve my mind. I would go to the orphanage where Jerry had lived and see for myself the record of his stay there. And I would see the parents of Joe Stiger.

I had noticed, on the pictures Mrs. Stiger had shown us, the address of the place

where they had lived in St. Louis, and I knew I could find the people she said were Joe's—or were they Jerry's?—parents. I would not tell Mrs. Stiger I was going. I wanted no cut-and-dried stories. I wanted to find out for myself.

I couldn't tell Jerry. I couldn't! Besides, he would want to go with me, and that would start Mrs. Stiger into legal proceedings. I couldn't even tell mother, and I had to leave Dessie with her. Mother was suspicious right away.

"You've been quarreling with Jerry," she accused. "I saw him yesterday, and he looks perfectly wretched. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Quarreling, indeed! If it only were as simple as that. But I got away without any explanations. I left a note for Jerry, telling him I would be away only a few days, and for him to wait at home and keep on loving me as I was loving him. I wanted to say "loving and trusting," but was I trusting him when I had to go in search of proofs? I told myself it was as much for Jerry as for myself.

V

I ARRIVED in St. Louis too late for visiting hours at the orphanage; so I went directly to the address where Mrs. Stiger had lived, and found from neighbors where her husband's parents were.

They were nice, middle-aged people, about like my own father and mother. They recognized the pictures of Jerry I showed them as those of their son, Joe.

"Are you sure, quite sure?" I pleaded.

"Can't be any mistake, miss. We raised him. Get that album, mother, and show the young lady the pictures of Joe."

Mrs. Stiger left the room, and returned a moment later, wiping the dust from a kodak album which was filled with pictures of Joe. Pictures from his early infancy, and I could see the stages of growth that had brought Joe—or was it Jerry?—to the man who was now my husband, or was he my husband? This man that looked so like Jerry, and yet it couldn't be—oh, it couldn't be Jerry!

"You wanted to know something about him, miss?" Mr. Stiger inquired.

I told them the whole story.

"Sounds like your Jerry must be our Joe, miss; or you are madam, aren't you?"

"Am I?" I wondered.

"Joe left here about four years ago. We

heard he took the Grant girl with him. I didn't know Louise—that's Joe's wife—had gone hunting him, did you, mother?"

"No," Mrs. Stiger replied. "She was working when I last saw her. Of course Louise would know him," she assured me. "Louise is a good girl; we're fond of her. We aimed to help her care for the children. I don't know why Joe does such things. We did our best to raise him right."

"We surely did," Mr. Stiger put in; "and he's been nothing but grief to us. I suppose we'd feel worse if he was our own, but—"

"Not your own! Isn't he your son, then?"

"Not really. We adopted him out of an orphanage."

An orphanage! Then Jerry was Joe, and Joe had a wife and those two little boys; and there were Dessie and me, nameless, without a label, as Jerry expressed it. Blackness settled upon me so darkly that even the bright little parlor of the Stigers seemed to be shadowed. Mr. Stiger had been talking; I must have missed some of his story.

"Feel worse if he was our own," he was repeating; "sort of as if it was our own bad blood showin' up. But as 'tis, we just admit we were poor pickers when we selected him."

"We chose him because he looked the most like our own baby of any we saw, don't you remember, father?"

"Then you adopted him when he was very small?" I asked, hope again rising within me.

"Yes, he was just a little tyke, 'bout a year old, wasn't he, mother?"

Mrs. Stiger nodded.

"You see," Mr. Stiger explained, "we lost our baby, Joe, in the big flood of '96. Our home was in the bottoms, and the water used to come up every spring and surround the house so there'd be days when we couldn't get out except in a boat.

"This time the water got higher and higher. We saw our stock swept away, and the water got knee-deep on the ground floor of our house, and we were driven upstairs before we gave up and decided to get out. I brought the boat around and tied it to the porch. Mother wrapped little Joe up, ready to take him out, and then he began to cough, croupy, you remember, mother?" Mr. Stiger turned to his wife.

"Yes, father," she answered absently,

her eyes focused on the far distant past. "Yes, and I couldn't find any flannel to tie around his throat, and you were hurrying me; I tore a piece off my petticoat."

"So you did, mother. I let mother down into the boat with a rope," he continued the story, "and then lowered little Joe down to her the same way. I went back to get a bundle of things mother had tied up to take. I heard a sort of swishing sound, and mother screamed. I looked around just in time to see a floating tree strike the boat and tear it from the balcony post where I had it tied.

"Mother was swept out by the branches of the tree. I jumped into the water and helped mother to get hold of the window sill, and then I started swimming toward the tree. I had to dodge so much debris, and there were so many trees, I lost sight of which one it was. Everything looked alike in the water. So I went back and helped mother into the house and upstairs again.

"We never left the house. We expected it would be swept away, but we didn't care. It was days before the flood went down. We spent all the rest of that season hunting down the river for little Joe's body, but we never found it.

"We didn't like the farm any more. We hated the sight of the river; so we came down here, and I went to work in the car shops. We were so lonesome we thought we'd take some poor friendless child and give it the care and love Joe would have had. But it didn't turn out well. He never was any comfort to us. Just worry and trouble, wasn't he, mother?"

"Yes, he was very willful, and hard to manage," Mrs. Stiger sadly agreed.

"But Jerry, my husband, told me he was in the orphanage till he was fourteen years old—the Custer Street Orphanage, he said," I told them.

"Joe would tell most any kind of a yarn that suited him," Mr. Stiger answered. "But I didn't know that he knew he wasn't ours. We wanted him to think he was. You are the only one we ever told the whole story to; I sort of felt you had a right to know."

"I thank you for your confidence, Mr. Stiger, but I can't quite believe my husband is your son. He looks like him, to be sure, but my husband is honest, and fine, and good."

"Joe knows how to be all of that. We

taught him the best we knew. For your own sake, I hope your man isn't Joe, but I am afraid he is."

I was afraid so, too, and I left the Stigers with a heart far heavier than theirs could possibly be. Jerry was Joe, and I—what was I, and what was poor little Dessie? I had started out with so much hope, so sure I could find the happy solution to the mystery that was destroying our home and happiness; and now this awful certainty confronted me.

VI

I WAS almost of a mind to return to my home in Cincinnati without visiting the orphanage, but as that had been a part of my plan in coming here, I would carry it out. At the offices of the Custer Street Orphanage I asked for the record of Jerry Foster, fully expecting to be told there was no such person. The girl at the desk pointed to the elevator, and told me to go to the clerk in the office below.

"Foster, Jerry Foster?" The old clerk in charge turned to the rows of books. "D, E, F," he read off. "Here we are, F." He took the book down.

I braced myself to hear him say there was no Jerry Foster, but, instead, he turned the leaves and finally read, "Foster, Jerry, 1917, Rincon Steel Works, Pittsburgh. That's the last address we have of him, madam."

Then there was a Jerry Foster! My Jerry! And he had been here, and he had been in Pittsburgh, just as he said.

"Before that?" I asked, in a voice that came to my ears hollow and from far off.

The clerk turned back to his books. "1910," he announced presently. "That's when he first left here. The record states he went to the Idler Ironworks, under the care of Henry Idler."

Yes, yes, Jerry had told me that very thing. I seemed to be waking from a horrible dream, just beginning to realize that I had been under an evil spell. Jerry Foster was not Joe Stiger.

"Who were his parents? Where did he come from?" I asked.

Again the clerk referred to his books. "Foster, let's see." Unemotionally, he ran a bony finger down a long line of books. "1894—1895—'96. Here we are: Foster, Jerry, infant, unidentified. Unclaimed. Rescued from river near Foster, Missouri, May 17, 1896. 2709G—that's the number

of his clothes. Would you like to see his clothes?"

His clothes! Jerry's little clothes! Things Jerry had worn when he was a wee baby. Jerry, who was my very own; not the Joe who had been thrust upon us lately. Suddenly those clothes seemed very precious to me.

"Could I have them—the clothes? I am his wife. I'd like to have them to keep."

"Don't know about that, madam. You'd have to ask at the office; but I can show them to you." He did—small, folded garments, in a manila envelope: a yellowed dress that once had been white, a lace-trimmed petticoat, little crocheted bootees, and—my eyes widened. Could it be true, what I saw? I stood before Jerry's little clothes, amazed, dumfounded.

"Was there something more, madam?" The clerk brought me back from my wild imaginings.

"Is there a telephone here I could use?"

"Upstairs in the reception room, madam." He seemed relieved to have me go.

I called up the Stigers and asked them to come to the orphanage to see what I had found. When they had agreed to do so, I seated myself in the little reception room, where I had a view of the door through which they must enter, and gave my mind over to the confusion of thoughts that raced through it.

VII

At last they came. The Stigers came in at one of the double entrance doors, and Jerry came in at the other.

Jerry! I was almost on my feet to rush to meet him when Mr. Stiger saw him and greeted: "Hello, Joe! So it was you the lady called us here to see?"

There it was again! Their Joe was my Jerry. He wasn't, but if there was any confusion of identity, I must know. I drew myself hard against the wall out of sight, and glued my eyes on Jerry's face. I would note the slightest sign of recognition. The least flicker of an eyelash should not escape me. If Jerry knew these people he would reveal it now.

"Pardon me," Jerry said courteously to Mr. Stiger. "You're picking on the wrong man."

Though I did not take my eyes from Jerry's face, I knew Mrs. Stiger had come forward and plucked at her husband's

sleeve. "That's not Joe, father," she whispered sharply.

Stiger looked more intently at Jerry. "'Course it's Joe," he declared with stubborn certainty.

Jerry now took a step toward them. "Who is this Joe? I am here because some one else has mistaken me for him. You know him—who is he—and do I look so much like him?"

"Like him! You are him," Stiger asserted.

"No, father," Mrs. Stiger contended; "he does look like Joe, kind of. But he isn't Joe. He's different."

I could have hugged dear, motherly Mrs. Stiger for the certainty she expressed that Jerry was not the Joe she had reared.

Jerry turned to her. "You're right, madam. I'm not Joe, whoever he is. I don't know who I am, but I am not the man called Joe."

If these people had been foster father and mother to him, Jerry could not stand before them and maintain that blank look; every last doubt must vanish before such a situation as this.

I came forward, and Jerry gasped and stared at me. "Why, Atha!" he exclaimed, and had me in his arms. "What are you doing here?"

"Finding you a family, Jerry," I answered excitedly. "These are the foster parents of the Joe that has troubled us so. But, you—oh, Jerry, wait till I show you who you are!"

I led them downstairs, where the old clerk was rearranging his records. "Will you show these people the record of Jerry Foster which you just showed to me?" I asked.

Obligingly, he laid the books open on the long counter. "There you are," and he read again the entries. Mr. and Mrs. Stiger were not much impressed. Jerry did not look as excited as I had expected, but they did not know what I knew.

"Now show them the clothes," I commanded, aquiver with anticipation. "Jerry, did you ever see the little clothes you had on when you were found?"

"No, never thought of them," he replied with indifference.

The manila envelope was taken from its pigeonhole. I spread out the little yellowed dress, and asked Mrs. Stiger to look at it. I laid the little skirt beside it. Mrs. Stiger glanced at them, but without inter-

est. I pulled the wrinkled woolen booties into shape and added them to my exhibit.

I felt the air getting tense. My heart beat so hard it nearly shut off my breath. I reached into the manila envelope for the last article there, and laid it, without speaking, before Mrs. Stiger—a strip of red flannel, one edge raveled, the other with scallops crocheted with wool. Mrs. Stiger gazed, fascinated. She put her hand out, and slowly took up the bit of flannel, and ran investigating fingers along its crocheted edge. She raised frightened eyes to her husband.

"Father, this is the piece I tore off my petticoat to tie around baby Joe's throat," she said in an awed voice.

Mr. Stiger drew near, and both studied the red woolen strip, and then looked again with questioning eyes at each other.

Mrs. Stiger was now interested in the other garments. "Yes, that's the dress Joey had on, and these booties; don't you remember, father, I made them while we were shut in with the flood. These are Joey's things, father; Joey's things," she repeated, amazed. "Then Joey wasn't drowned. Where is Joey? Where is my baby?"

"He was—was found—the child?" Mr. Stiger stammered to the clerk.

But this was too slow for me. "Don't you see," I interrupted; "these are the clothes of Jerry Foster; and here"—I pulled Jerry forward—"here is Jerry Foster himself."

Jerry was speechless, and they glanced at him, but turned again to the little garments. Really, you couldn't blame them; it did seem impossible that my big six-foot, hundred-and-seventy-pound Jerry could ever have been the tiny baby who wore the yellowed dress, and small booties, and the strip of red flannel on his throat. It was too much for any of them to comprehend.

Mrs. Stiger still held the bit of flannel, smoothing it between shaking fingers. I watched her with growing love in my heart.

If this was Jerry's mother, then she was mine, too. I put my arm around her and turned her toward Jerry.

"This is the baby who wore those clothes so long ago, grown to be a man now. He is your son." I grasped Jerry's hand and squeezed it hard. "Oh, Jerry, isn't it wonderful! Your own mother, Jerry!"

"I wonder if it could be?" Jerry said, just barely out loud.

Mrs. Stiger looked at Jerry, and Jerry looked at her. Something in their eyes seemed to answer each other. Slowly, fearfully, Mrs. Stiger put out her hand, just as she had toward the bit of flannel, and touched Jerry's hand, questioningly, experimentally, as if like a blind person, she could identify him by contact.

At the touch of her hand on his, it seemed as if Jerry became a little boy again—a little lost boy who had just now found his mother. All the years of his lonely orphaned life showed in his quivering lips and twitching features. He took the dazed little woman into his arms.

"Mother! My mother! My own mother!" Jerry's voice was choked and broken with tears.

She drew his head down upon her shoulder and patted his dark hair comfortingly with a hand that still held the bit of red flannel. "My boy—my little lost baby boy! My baby, grown so big."

Mr. Stiger came close to his wife and patted her shoulder protectingly. "Now, mother; there now, mother," he soothed.

"It's all right, father—I'm all right." She looked through wet eyes from the shelter of her son's strong arms. "It's Joey, father; our Joey," her voice choked. "Our little baby Joe, come back to us."

"Yes, mother, yes. So 'tis," the father agreed, without in the least knowing what he was saying.

And I, who had come to St. Louis to prove that Jerry was not Joe, was weeping like a waterfall for very joy that he was the real Joe Stiger.

WILD BEE

THE wild bee with its pollened thighs
Goes faring on its far emprise,
Not dreaming over meadow seas
It bears such rich futurities.

Sennett Stephens

The O'Grady Obit

HERE IS A GLIMPSE INTO THE SOUL OF THAT COMPLEX
CREATURE, THE DAILY NEWSPAPER, AND A
PICTURE OF ITS WILLING SLAVES

By Robert P. Lowry

FOR many months there had been a rapid succession of night office boys in the city room of the *News*, and each had been almost a total liability to the paper.

There were bright boys, who took such an intelligent interest in the linotype machines on the floor above, or the presses in the basement, that they had no leisure to carry up copy or bring down proofs.

There were lazy boys, who slumbered serenely through stentorian hails of: "Copy boy, boy, boy!" And there were worthy youths who brought in their high school work with them, and flatly refused to have their avid pursuit of learning interrupted by any newspaper man.

There was also a mild-mannered lout, with fists a little smaller than steam shovels, who had fought in one or two preliminaries at the National Sporting Club. One night he took exception to certain barbed reprimands from Farlow, the city editor, and invited that worthy to step out into the alley back of the *News* and settle the affair in true Gray's Ferry Road style.

Two watchmen and the policeman from the corner collaborated in removing the valiant Schuyllkill ranger from the premises, after Farlow had prudently declined the invitation to combat.

But, with the coming of Harper, there was a great and blessed change. He was different from the others, not only in that he gave perfect satisfaction from the start, but in every other respect as well.

To begin with, Harper, by no elasticity of the imagination, could be called a boy. His age was a matter for conjecture, with guesses centering around sixty. He was short and slender, with hair almost white,

deep-set dark eyes, and a melancholy walrus mustache.

He sat on the extreme edge of a chair in the front of the local room, and the instant any one on the city desk called "Copy," he was afoot with a tremulously eager: "Yes, sir!" and running toward the inner office. A hundred times a night he ran up the stairs to the composing room with copy, and scurried down with bunches of galley proofs fluttering behind him.

"Poor old fellow! He's so darned afraid we'll think he's too old for the job!" Sam Carson, the assistant city editor, explained to Farlow. "He doesn't realize he's five hundred per cent better than anybody we've ever had."

"Now, Sam, don't butt in and spoil the only decent office boy since Forney was a cub," Farlow admonished. "It's easy enough to get new assistant city editors, but as long as I live, I'll never get another boy who goes up and gets the proofs without being told. By the way, we mustn't call him boy. Call him Harper."

"Why not Mr. Harper?"

"Suppose you put a good, bright head on this fire story, in place of this nice lady-like label," Farlow suggested, handing him a proof.

II

DESPITE Farlow's warning, Sam Carson, for a time, constituted himself the protector of the elderly copy boy. He gave Harper an old overcoat several sizes too large for him, and sternly rebuked the cubs for galvanizing Harper into unlawful activity by stepping inside the partition of the inner office and calling "Copy!" more or less after the manner of Farlow, at times when the city editor was elsewhere.

Sam, in his benevolently despotic way, began pulling wires to get a job for Harper in the classified advertising department. And to further this scheme, he tried to cross-examine Harper in regard to his past.

He was amazed when the little man insisted that he did not remember where he had been born, or where he had spent his early years. Before coming to Philadelphia, he said, he had worked as porter in a saloon near the Chelsea docks in New York for a long time. He was not certain how long. After the place had been sold, he and another man had started beating their way to Philadelphia on a freight, and had been arrested in Trenton, and given sixty days each in prison.

Carson, who was becoming more and more impatient, fairly snorted when Harper gravely averred that, after he had reached Philadelphia, "my feet just seemed to bring me to the *News* office."

"See here, Harper," Carson said condescendingly, "I'm asking this for your own good. If there are things you don't want me to know about, just say so; but don't be ridiculous. I want to find out what experience you've had, so as to get you this job downstairs."

"But, Mr. Carson, I don't want a job downstairs. I might not be able to do the work there," Harper objected.

"Do you mean to say you'd rather run yourself ragged carrying copy than sit at a desk working on books, or taking ads over the phone?" Carson asked in amazement.

"I'd rather be here," Harper replied, apologetically.

"All right. Have it your own way, then. I'm through."

Early one morning in November, a month or so after Harper had appeared at the *News*, Sam Carson was seated at a desk in the big room, reading a magazine. All the staff had left except Hall, the reporter on late duty.

After a time, Hall, who was aimlessly wandering about the room, drifted over to the assistant city editor.

"He surely is a weird old party, isn't he?" Hall began, crooking his thumb toward Harper, who, with his chair tilted against the wall at the back of the room, was absorbed in the first edition of the *News*.

"Just a poor old lag," Carson commented. "I had everything fixed to get him a

job downstairs, with more money and less leg work, and what does he do but spin me a lot of fake stuff about not remembering anything about himself. I'll bet he can remember the insides of a lot of jails. And you won't get any tears out of me if you pull the old one about his having come down in the world. That guy was never up in his life."

"I'm not so sure. He looks as if he had been somebody with bells on, once, and he doesn't talk like a bum, either. But what started me saying he was weird was this: a few nights ago, around six o'clock, I was finishing a story at my desk back there, when Harper comes ambling along, dreamy like, with his hat and coat on. And do you know, he walked right across the room toward the wall opposite the door, taking off his coat as he went along. Then he suddenly stopped and looked at the wall, sort of puzzled, as if he expected to find something there. After a little while he went out to the lockers."

"Just a plain, everyday nut!"

"Perhaps; but kindly tell me what used to be along that wall?"

"The old coat cupboard, of course," and Carson looked at the other man a little startled. "But it's been at least ten years since it was torn out. Gee whiz, Harry, what are you getting at?"

"Fairly obvious, even to a person of your intelligence."

"By Jinks, you may be right at that! He told me his feet brought him to the office. We'll have to look into this. Maybe Hanning can throw some light on it. He's been here since they put Billy Penn on top of City Hall. Meanwhile, how about a round of casino?"

But, before Hall could fetch the cards, the telephone on the city editor's desk started ringing, petulantly, insistently.

Carson lifted the receiver.

"Just left, doctor," he said, after a brief pause. "This is Carson, his assistant; remember me when I used to cover the coroner's office? What's that? Do you mean the O'Grady, the old political boss? Holy smoke, where did he die? That's down near Winslow Junction, isn't it? What was the trouble? Yes, he was getting on, and that stretch in the pen helped matters. Who was with him? I see; old friends gave him the gate. What time did he die? And, doctor, you're not going to call any of the other papers, are you? That's fine. We

surely appreciate it. All right, I'll mail you a copy myself. Good-by, sir."

III

"WIDE-AWAKE, Harry!" Carson called in true fire house style. "John O'Grady died a short time ago, and we have a clean beat on it. The name may not mean anything to you, and so long as he was alive, he wasn't worth a line. But dead, he owns the front page—for a day at least. He was the last big boss of this town, and got ten years for reaching into the city treasury and helping himself. He served about eight, and, for the last ten or a dozen years, he has lived down in Jersey, at Clementon, very much out of things. Dr. Benson called up just now and tipped us off. You take notes on what he gave me and write it. But first put in a call for the O'Grady house, and verify the fact that he is dead. I'd trust the doctor to Java and back, but we must be absolutely certain. Now, be sure you get this straight," and Carson proceeded to give Hall the information he had just acquired from Dr. Benson.

Both Hall and Carson were too much occupied to notice Harper. The elderly office boy did not hear Carson talking over the telephone to Dr. Benson, but with the very mention of O'Grady's name in Carson's instructions to Hall, which were given in the outer office, Harper was all attention. He put aside the paper he was reading, brought the front legs of his chair down to the floor, and leaned forward eagerly, so as not to miss a syllable Carson uttered. After that he sat bolt upright for a long time, staring straight ahead of him, totally oblivious to his surroundings.

In the meantime the assistant city editor hurried down the hall to notify the make-up editor of O'Grady's passing. Returning, he took a small key from the end of his watch chain and unlocked the sliding wooden flap of an old-fashioned cabinet that stood by Farlow's desk.

Carson ran his hand along the envelopes in the second drawer until he came to one with O'Brien on the outside. He flipped two more aside and pounced on one bearing the name of O'Grady; but as he started to take it out of the drawer, he noticed that it bore the name of George O'Grady, a judge of the orphan's court. The next envelope contained the life history of a gentleman named O'Toole.

Carson's heart missed a beat as he ran

over the whole collection again without finding the envelope he was after. He knew that it had been there a few months ago, because he had happened to take it out and glance over the obituary inside.

Carson took out the drawer and dumped the contents on the desk. There were about thirty envelopes, all told. He picked them up, one by one, and when he came to the last, he had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. For the carefully written biography of the last of the political overlords, which had taken weeks to prepare, and which had been waiting twenty years or more for this very night, was not among those present.

There were two other keys to the cabinet. Andrews, the day assistant, had one, and Farlow himself carried the other. In a very few moments Carson had Farlow on the telephone at his house. The city editor knew nothing whatever about the O'Grady obituary, and profanely promised to fire Andrews the first thing after he reached the office at noon. All efforts to get Andrews's apartment met with the maddening: "They do not answer."

Carson next tried to get Barker, the veteran political reporter of the *News*, and the one man on the staff who could supply the missing information offhand, at the Pen and Pencil Club and at his house, and drew blanks in both places. Then he routed two antique politicians out of bed. They were vastly interested to hear the news, but were hopelessly vague as to the family name of O'Grady's wife, the county in Ireland where he had been born, and the number and sex of his children.

In the files there was an envelope marked John O'Grady. Inside was a slip of paper on which was typed: "See city department for obit." All the envelopes of clippings dealing with the old boss had vanished. An efficiency expert who had driven the employees of the *News* to distraction for months had seen to that.

A fire, fifteen years before, had destroyed all the bound copies of the *News* preceding that time, and a swift search of what was known as the library revealed a totally inadequate sketch of O'Grady in a twenty-five-year-old sycophantic history of the city.

Carson ripped out the page and carried it back to his desk. He noticed, in passing, that Harper had come to the front of the room, and was walking to and fro, as if the

nervous tension of the situation had been communicated to him.

Time, arch foe of all newspaper men, was tramping rudely on Carson's heels. He must make the best of what he already had in hand, and the *News* would have to be satisfied with a big beat in being the only paper to announce the death of O'Grady. But Carson ground his teeth when he thought how vastly more effective the announcement would be with the original comprehensive obituary to back it up.

IV

CARSON edited Hall's introduction, and wrote the two-column headline to go above it, accompanying the eight-column banner line which would inform the world that "Honest John" O'Grady had departed from works to rewards, if any. Then, as he thrust the paper in his typewriter, and set about the hopeless task of manufacturing an adequate biography of O'Grady from what he already knew, plus the idiotic sketch in the old history, Carson became aware that Harper was standing by his side.

"Run and play," Carson said, waving him away.

"I don't believe I know you," Harper retorted. "You must have come on the paper while I was away. I'm not quite certain how I come to be here myself, but I gather you have lost your O'Grady obit. The point is, if you wish me to write another, I probably know more about 'Honest John' than any one now alive in the city of Philadelphia."

It did not need this extraordinary speech to inform Carson that an entirely new Harper was speaking. The timidity had departed from his manner as a garment discarded, and in its place there was an air of easy confidence which caused Carson to look at him as if he could not believe his eyes.

Had the office boy suddenly gone mad? On the other hand, had he suddenly recovered his sanity? In any case, could this elderly failure, this snapper-up of unconsidered trifles, really be of any help?

"Go to it, and write everything you know. We might as well have a regular madhouse here, while we're at it," Carson said, partly to get rid of Harper and partly from blind instinct never to pass up a lead, however unpromising.

Harper took a wad of copy paper, sat

down at a near-by desk, borrowed a pencil from Hall, and started writing.

Carson, once launched on his own story, forgot all about the new Harper, and when he had finished a page, from force of habit, he called on the office slave to rush it to the composing room.

But the little man at the desk did not so much as raise his head when his name was called, and Hall came forward and took the sheet and all the succeeding ones to the composing room.

Harper was still writing when Carson had finished his story, and there was a rapidly increasing pile of sheets in front of him. More from curiosity than anything else, Carson reached over and gathered up what Harper had written.

"Here goes my faith in Santa Claus," he said to himself as he arranged the pages in order.

At the left-hand upper corner was written: "O'Grady Obit—Nevins." But Carson had no time to puzzle out this new enigma. He glanced through half a dozen pages of Harper's story—and ran down the hall to the make-up editor.

"Sorry, Mr. Blaine, but we'll have to make another lift on O'Grady!" he burst out.

"Jumping Judas Priest! I thought you'd cleaned up on that story, Sam. You know it's getting late, and we won't get it in enough papers to count," Blaine returned peevishly.

"I can't help it. We lost the original obit, and I just fixed up what I could get my hands on while another one was being written. This is real. We've got to have it or bust."

"You might have said something about it before. How much will you have of it?"

"There's a column already written, and a column and a half to come."

"Got any of it in type?"

"It's just going up."

"Something mighty fishy about this whole business somewhere, Sam. You slipped a cog, and you know it. Well, for the love of Great Goliath, make it snappy!"

V

As he read page after page of perfect copy, Carson swore gently to himself at the sheer wonder of the thing. It was not that it was so carefully written that he did not have to place a pencil on it, except to write in a subhead here and there; it was,

rather, that he realized that he was reading one of those rare masterpieces of newspaper work, which, despite the fact that they are turned off at white heat, and aim to serve only the purpose of an hour, are just as much literature as "King Lear" or "The Book of Job."

For this was no cut and dried chronicle of a dead politician. It gave dates, and other vital facts, to be sure, but cunningly interspersed were apt anecdotes, scraps of conversation, bits of color, marvelously garnered from the past, so that little by little, by sheer magic, the writer forced his picture of O'Grady up from the flatness of the page until it became a thing of three dimensions, breathed, and bled.

Almost at the beginning Harper told how Dan Casey and his wife took O'Grady in when he was fairly starving. Many years later, when the boss heard that the Caseys had fallen on evil days, he promptly bought a little farm for them out in Chester County. But the old couple obstinately refused to leave their hovel down in Martin's Village, until one day O'Grady coaxed them out for a ride in his carriage, and during their absence had one of his men soak the house with coal oil and touched a match to it.

O'Grady's story, in part, has been enacted in every large city of the United States. Landing with nothing, starting in with pick and shovel, gradually establishing himself as a small contractor, and at the same time, with the astounding gift for practical politics, which is the heritage of the Irish, rising from ward worker to committeeman, district leader, councilman, ward leader, State Senator, he finally took his place as the undisputed boss of the city. He made Congressmen his messenger boys, and caused one United States Senator to jump every time he snapped his fingers.

His devastating wit, how he scandalized the neighborhood of Twenty-Second and Pine Streets by leading his little horse in through the front door of his new and ornate house, his struggle with a refractory shirt bosom when he appeared for the first time in a dress suit at a banquet of the Friendly Sons of Saint Patrick, his ignorance and pig-headedness, and the amazing lengths he would go to satisfy a grudge or do a friend a favor—all these things made Harper's story a joy forever.

There was also the description of the trial, where day after day, and week after

week, O'Grady sat grim, defiant and taciturn, and finally listening to the judge, whose election he himself had ordered, pronounce sentence without a change of expression. Then, when the court refused him permission to visit his grandchild in a hospital half a dozen blocks away, he had broken down, bowing his head and sobbing without restraint.

By half past three Harper had stopped writing, and Carson took the last page upstairs himself. Blaine, his hands full of proofs, was watching the men lock up the forms of the front page.

"All up, Sam?" he asked.

Carson nodded.

"Fine! Now, between ourselves, where in the name of the whale that swallowed Jonah did you get this stuff?"

"A real old-time newspaper man happened in. I never saw anything to touch him. Just sat down and wrote, without stopping to look up a date or anything. Pretty good yarn, don't you think?"

"Pretty good, your grandmother's tabby cat. Why, it's great! Who wrote it?"

"That reminds me, I've got to catch him before he leaves," Carson evaded, and made for the steps.

VI

CARSON found Harper fast asleep, with his head resting on the desk where he had been writing.

Carson touched the little man lightly on the shoulder. Harper jumped up, rubbing his eyes.

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Carson. I must have fallen asleep," he said. "Is there anything you want?"

"Only to congratulate you on your story. You saved all our lives this night."

"My story? What do you mean, sir?"

"All right, Harper. Don't bother your head about it. It's time to go home. By the way, do you know any one named Nevins?"

"Nevins? Nevins? Sounds sort of familiar, but I can't remember, now. I can't remember," he repeated in a dazed sort of way as he walked down the hall.

Carson stared after him in wonder.

"Talk about split personalities. His is split seven ways!" he declared aloud.

In response to an urgent summons, Carson hurried down to the office shortly after noon. Farlow told him that Andrews had confessed to loaning the O'Grady obituary

to a friend overnight, and having picked the one night in a generation when he would be certain to be caught at it. He was duly fired. "Hanning wants to see you right away," Farlow concluded.

William Hanning, the managing editor of the *News*, whirled around from his big roll-top desk as Carson entered the door of his room.

"Great stuff, Sam. We cleaned up the town on O'Grady, and it won't hurt you a bit when there's a chance of stepping up higher," chortled Hanning, holding out his hand in congratulation.

"But that wasn't the real reason I asked to have you called in here so early. Tell me how we came to get that obit—I mean the one in the last list—and tell me everything you know about the man that wrote it. Everything, mind."

Carson carried out orders, not forgetting what Hall had told him about Harper hunting for the old clothes closet a decade after it had disappeared, the name Nevins on the slug line of the obit itself, and Harper's failure to account for its presence.

"Whether he remembers it or not, his name is Nevins," Hanning announced. "There's no question about it. I knew Jim Nevins had written that story before I read two paragraphs of it. To make certain, I got the copy. There it is, with his name at the top, and in his writing. And to think that he should come back from the grave just when we most needed him! Queer how things happen, isn't it? I suppose the death of O'Grady was the one thing of all others that would have brought him back."

"Yes, but who is Nevins?" Carson asked, eagerly.

Hanning gazed dreamy-eyed at the buildings on the other side of the street, as if he had not heard the question. It was half a minute before he turned to Carson.

"Nevins! Is it possible you never heard of Nevins? He was the best damned reporter we ever had on this paper. Also the best friend I ever had in the world." And Hanning went back to his contemplation of the office structures over the way.

"What became of him, sir?" Carson asked at last.

"God knows. Evidently Nevins himself hasn't an idea. Knocked himself out putting O'Grady in jail. He turned up the original story that started the grand jury investigation. He was at it day and night

for months. Then, after the trial, he started off for Chile on a sailing vessel. At Valparaiso he went ashore, and never came back to the ship. We even sent a detective all the way down there, but it was no use. Nevins had simply dropped out, and until this morning I thought he was dead."

"Some spiggoty must have walloped him over the head," Carson suggested.

"Possibly. Now, Sam, I want you to get hold of him. Where does he live?"

"Some flop house, I guess. Never would give us any address. But it's pay day, and he usually comes in about three. Suppose I nail him for you?"

"Yes, and bring him up here. Invent any reason for doing so you think of, only don't get him frightened. If he's still Harper, he naturally won't know me from Adam, so you'd better stick around. I want to see if I can bring back Nevins again. If I can, I'll take him out to my place and get old Dr. Dangerfield to look after him. Dangerfield's the best man in the country in such cases. Later on, perhaps, Nevins can come back here, if he feels up to it, and do a special column for us. It ought to be a winner. I guess I'm getting ahead of the game, though. It may be Jim never will be himself again. But I've an idea he will. Anyway, we'll see what we can do. And, Sam, remember one thing: if he starts to wander around the room, looking at photographs and things, don't try to stop him."

VII

SHORTLY after three o'clock, Carson led a palpably nervous, shabby little man with a big walrus mustache into Hanning's room. Although Hanning had carefully schooled himself for this encounter, he half arose to his feet, his hand extended in welcome; but, as the little man stared at him blankly, the managing editor hastily resumed his seat.

"It is very good of you to come up here," Hanning said, a little unsteadily. "I understand you've been living in New York for some time, and I wished to ask you if you had seen anything of a man named Nevins over there—Jim Nevins?"

A troubled expression came over the little man's face.

"Mr. Carson asked me the same thing last night, and all day long I've been thinking about that name," he replied. "I've heard it before, somewhere, but for the life of me I can't think where. If I should re-

member any time, I'll come and tell you about it, sir," and he edged toward the door.

"Suppose you just sit down quietly over there and see if it comes to you," Hanning suggested kindly, indicating a chair across the big room, near a window. The little man obediently took it. Hanning turned again to his desk, and Carson picked up a novel from a small bookcase on top of the desk.

For a time the man known as Harper sat looking out the window. Then he slowly rose to his feet and began examining the pictures. The cartoons he passed over quickly. But before an old flash light of a staff banquet he lingered for five minutes, peering at each face grouped about the big table.

Finally, in the course of his peregrinations, the little man came to a large table at the other side of the room from Hanning and Carson. On it were spread out the last editions of the city's five morning newspapers. Harper ran his eyes over the front page of each one until he came to the *News*.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, with a sharp intake of breath.

Carson, stealing a glance in his direction, was suddenly reminded that this was almost certainly the first time Harper had seen the O'Grady story in print, as he had left the office before the papers were off the press. He wondered whether Hanning realized this fact, and looked sharply at the managing editor. Hanning merely raised his hand, after the manner of an official on a golf course when the champion is about to attempt a crucial putt.

After awhile the little man known as Harper started thinking aloud. Neither Carson nor Hanning could see his face, but they sensed a subtle difference in the tone

of his voice. There was now an assurance about it which Carson had remarked the night before, when Harper had, for a brief time, become Nevins with such startling results. To Hanning it was an authentic echo from the past.

"Poor old 'Honest John!'" the voice ran on. "Wasn't such a bad sort. Dumb as they make them in some ways—smart in others, until he got the idea he was Lord God Almighty, and—"

"What's this?" he challenged sharply, and the others realized that he had come to the obituary proper under its divisional head.

"Why, this is *my* story! I remember, now. I wrote it last night, and it's a pip-pin. Almost good enough to pass O'Grady into heaven," he added whimsically, as he turned toward Carson and Hanning, who were tensely watching him.

His eyes passed over Carson as if the latter had been a piece of furniture, and he stood staring at Hanning.

Slowly there dawned on the face of the little man known as Harper, a wistful, startled look of recognition. His upper lip trembled. His eyes filled with tears.

Carson, with an understanding nod to Hanning, slid from the room.

"Bill! Oh, Bill!"

It was not so much a greeting as a half hysterical call for help that came from the lips of the little man.

Hanning swiftly crossed the room. His right hand grasped the right hand of the forlorn little wanderer, and with his left hand he patted the shoulder of Nevins's threadbare coat.

"Everything's all right, Jim," Hanning crooned, leading Nevins to a chair by the desk. "You've been away a long time, old man, but you've come back, and everything is absolutely all right, now."

L'ENVOI

I WONDER, shall I die
With my sweetest songs unsung?
Pass through the silent portal
With my best deeds undone?
Or will the just, unerring ones
Let music through to me?
And with a patient little smile
Grant me one gesture free?

Glenn Visscher

The Siren East

THIS IS THE STORY OF A STOWAWAY ON A SHIP OF DREAMS

By Anne Duffield

"WHEN you are in Cairo," my mother said, "I wish you would take the time to look up poor little Ellie Braggs."

"Ellie Braggs!" I echoed. "Good Heaven—I had forgotten all about her. It must be ten years since she went away."

"It's twelve," my mother returned, "and I expect that by this time she's only too anxious to come back again!"

"Do they hear from her?"

"Her mother knows she's alive. Apparently Ellie never writes—sends a picture post card once in awhile."

"I wonder how it all turned out," I began, reflectively.

"How *could* it turn out, Arnold?" my mother countered sharply. "Poor, pretty little fool. But we did our best. I'm sure you tried—"

I had, indeed, "tried."

Ellie Braggs! Although I had long ceased to think of her, my mother's words evoked her poignantly. She was one of those lovely, incredible girls that spring, like the unearthly flowers of a swamp, from the glooms and the fogs of Bloomsbury.

You'll see them there any evening, coming suddenly out of the mist; just the glance of two starry eyes, the turn of a silken ankle, the gleam of a slim white throat—and they are gone again, into the fog. They have gone toward the respectable marriage lines, the babies, the dragged and shapeless bodies and faded skins that are waiting for them at the end of the road. For that is where they go, those tinted porcelain faces, and slender limbs, and light dancing feet—the little roses of the town.

That is the way Mrs. Braggs had gone, that gray and tight-lipped woman who had been, my mother said, prettier than her daughters in her own youth. That was how Clara, the elder girl, went; I saw that for myself.

But Ellie, the younger, had not taken that road. Ellie had gone to Egypt with Mahmoud, the son of Saad.

II

It was the winter of nineteen twelve, I remember, and I was studying desperately for my finals. My people were in France, and I had taken a room at No. 21, Mrs. Braggs's house in Bloomsbury.

No. 21 was one of those tall, narrow houses whose cold walls seem to press in upon you as you enter, and whose passages hold the odors of a generation of uninspired meals. You never could get in out of the fog when you opened the door of that house; you came into a deeper fog—and staler. The gas jet in its wire cage gleamed in a blurred ring; the narrow stairs wavered and were lost in obscurity.

At the end of the hall was a brown door; it opened upon utter darkness and let in a draft of colder air and a hint of mice and soot. Members of the family, coming from outdoor, always scurried across the hallway, opened this door, and plunged into the blackness beyond; they plunged downward, judging by the diminishing patter of feet on bare boards.

One judged aright. Six feet underground, at the back of the house, was the family lair, the kitchen. Two small windows, giving upon an oozing brick wall, let in a yellowy light strengthened by the single gas jet that flared perpetually above the dresser.

There was a coal range in the deep bricked chimney, with a kettle of water always boiling, and a generous teapot simmering. The floor was covered with linoleum on which were placed sundry bits of ancient carpet, one before each chair, for, although the air of the room was warm and thick, from the floor there struck upward a thin and penetrating chill.

The ceiling was grimed with smoke; the outer walls bore faint, evil-looking stains here and there, covered, in a rainy season, with a curiously unpleasant, plushy film. It was ninety-three years old, that kitchen, and it had never had a ray of sunshine in it or an honest draft of air through it in all that time.

And yet there was about it a strange, a sinister charm. It was warm, it was dim, obscure, and hidden; it wrapped you in its somnolent spell, and when it had done that it had you. It had captured Mrs. Braggs, who seldom crossed its threshold; and it had lured Clara, the elder daughter, who, although married and presumably escaped, came back each afternoon to sit in the warm glow of the stove, and drink cup after cup of tea; gossiping with her mother and Ellie, nibbling bread and butter and little brown shrimps, and drowsily drinking more tea. And it had seized Mr. Braggs. It had him fast.

Close to the chimney stood father's chair, a great, roomy wicker thing, broken and sagging, stuffed with feathers and covered with faded chintz. It was a disreputable old chair, but shamefully comfortable.

Here Mr. Braggs sat, evening after evening, smoking his pipe and drinking his pint—or two pints—growing slowly more vacant eyed, mildly fuddled, completely silent. No one ever spoke to him, no one took the slightest notice of him until Mrs. Braggs, being ready to go up to bed, would exclaim harshly, "Now, then, father!" and he would arise stiffly, wipe his drooping mustache with an irresolute hand, and shamle off in the wake of his wife.

These two, whose attitude toward each other had become that of intense contempt on her side and weak resentment on his, who never spoke to each other save for an occasional angry exclamation from the wife and an irritable whine from the husband, who had outlived all pretense of affection, slept together in a soggy bed in a room with shut windows, and had so slept for twenty-five years.

I have described this familiar lair at some length, because it impressed me as such an extraordinary setting for Mahmoud, for it was here that I first saw him. How he had established his right to be there I don't know, for Mrs. Braggs did not hold with social relations with her lodgers—my own case, of course, excepted. Mrs. Braggs had dandled me on her knee.

However, there he was: a laughing, brilliant-eyed boy, with a face like a pale-brown cameo, small, hard, white teeth, and straight, shining black hair. He was sitting at the table, drinking tea—which he must have loathed—and Clara and Mrs. Braggs were laughing at something he had just said.

Little, golden-haired Ellie sat apart, her wide blue eyes fixed upon his face, her pink mouth tremulous, her small, red, childish hands tightly clasped in her lap. Although I didn't know how he had managed to become an inmate of that kitchen, I saw clearly enough *why* he was there. For while he neither spoke to her nor looked at her, it was Ellie who was the cause; it was beautiful little Ellie that he had followed down those dark stairs.

It wasn't long before this fact was evident to the family. Mahmoud was desperately in love with the fair-faced English girl, and made no attempt to conceal it. He belonged, I gathered, to the well-to-do cultivator class, and his intention toward Ellie was entirely honorable.

As for her, she was bewitched. You couldn't blame her. She had never encountered any one like Mahmoud. Gayety is by no means a characteristic natural to the Egyptians, but certain individuals among them have, when young, a childlike abandon, a verve, a joy in life that is well-nigh irresistible.

Mahmoud was one of these. Vital, compelling, sweet-tempered and high-spirited, he was like a flame in that twilight house. He swept them all before him, and when he finally asked for Ellie's little hand, he had Mrs. Braggs and Clara already firmly on his side.

As for the child's father, he, of course, did not count. It was open to question whether he had ever taken in the fact that Mahmoud was in the house at all.

I remember the discussion that followed upon Mahmoud's declaration. My mother, returned from France, came down to remonstrate with her old servant, Mrs. Braggs, and we all, with the exception of the young lovers, sat in the kitchen, and all talked at once.

Mr. Braggs sat in his accustomed corner, his glass in his hand, watching with vacant eyes the winking old stove. I remember wondering whether any of the conversation penetrated that foggy brain of his.

My mother was, of course, strongly opposed to the marriage.

"It can't be permitted," she declared. "You've no idea, Ellen, what her life would be like. She would have no friends, either of her own race or her husband's, to begin with."

"She 'asn't many friends 'ere," Mrs. Braggs returned, "and I don't know as friends is much use to a person—not in comparison with a good and well-to-do 'usband."

"But he won't *be* a good husband," I cut in, "not according to our ideas. There'll be other women—native women—bound to be, after a time."

Mrs. Braggs disagreed. "I doubt it. Ellie's got a good deal of me in 'er, and I've never 'ad no trouble with Braggs that way."

"But, Ellen," my mother remonstrated, "it's entirely different. You can't compare your husband—"

The other woman stiffened.

"Braggs was a good-looking young chap when we married," she said, obstinately, "and all the girls ready to give 'im the glad eye. But I managed that all right. Give 'em their beer, and keep 'em in of an evening; let 'em see you won't stand no nonsense—"

She discussed him as if he were deaf, or an idiot, or not there at all. It was the family way with father, and, indeed, he gave no sign of comprehension.

"But Mahmoud is Mohammedan," my mother went on, irritated by Ellen's obtuseness, "and his religion allows him four wives—"

"He's not likely to take four wives, or even two," I interrupted, "though he will undoubtedly have other women. But that is not the worst part. Ellie will be degraded, looked down upon by his people and her own; she will be an outcast in a strange country, and she will have no redress. While her novelty and her prettiness last, she may be happy, but when she fades—and she'll fade quickly out there—she won't be treated well."

"Mahmoud," began Mrs. Braggs, "is not—"

She paused to choose her words.

"I mean no disparagement of Mahmoud," I went on quickly. "I like him. He is one of the best of his type, and he's very honestly in love with Ellie now. But their ways are not our ways, Mrs. Braggs,

and I tell you now"—I spoke strongly, for the thing appeared to me more and more monstrous the longer I thought of it—"that child will be crushed, broken; she may even suffer physically as well—she may be beaten—"

"And what if she is?" a voice broke in. "What if her husband does have other women, does beat her, what does it matter? She will have seen the East!"

III

It was Mr. Braggs who had spoken.

If the iron stove had suddenly sprung from its niche and danced upon the table, the effect would have been less startling. He had arisen to his feet and stood facing us, and I thought that he looked as if a flame had been lighted somewhere inside his shambling form.

"You don't know!" he cried, raising a hand and shaking it at us. "But I know. *I know.* I'm down at the docks, in the warehouse, and lunch times I go and watch the unloading of the ships—ships with brown and yellow sailors, very quick, and singing queer songs sometimes. I've seen the names on the bales and crates—Java, Colombo, Yokohama, Tientsin, Shanghai, aye, and queerer old ones than that—Jaffa and Bokhara, and Teheran! And inside those names are silks, and rugs, and spices, and strange scents—"

"Father!" interpolated Clara, aghast; but he rolled on, unheeding:

"Bales and crates—and the names of the fruits they bring! Guavas, mangoes, pomegranates, and one what they call passion fruit—"

"It's like a verse of the Psalms," my mother whispered wickedly; and, truly, it was. Like a prophet of old, he poured out his words, his body shaking, his eyes ablaze with that inward flame.

"Listen! Once I saw a great pile of elephants' tusks, with a little brown man standing guard; and once—a hot, sunny day—the cable broke, and a great crate of oranges fell crashing into another crate that was filled with spices. They both was smashed to bits, and the oranges, bright gold they was, went rolling about in the sun, and the smell of the spices—I've never forgot it. It seemed—it seemed—" he wavered.

Slowly the flame flickered out, he glanced uneasily at his wife, fumbled for his glass, and sank, shamefaced, into his chair again.

"Been talking a lot of rot," he mumbled. "Don't mind me."

"I should think so!" his wife exclaimed harshly. "I don't know what Lady Scott will think, I'm sure. 'Old your nose and drink your beer, do. We don't want none o' your opinions. You and your East!"

He never spoke again, so far as I gathered, until Ellie's wedding, a bitter day in March, with a nipping wind. As we came out of the registrar's office—for my mother, unable to prevent the marriage, had done what she felt to be the next best thing, and insisted on our both being there to see Ellie "properly married"—the wind shrieked at us and flung a cloud of gritty dust into our mouths and eyes.

"Ellie'll be well out of this confounded climate," I gasped to Mr. Braggs, who was beside me, depressed and obviously chilly in a new black suit with a dispirited white carnation dangling from a buttonhole. Once again he astounded me.

"It's her mother's kitchen that she's well out of, Mr. Arnold, sir. What I mean to say, she's escaped. Look at our Clara, married to a nice young chap, and got her good flat, high up, sunny and all—and what happens? Every evening, sir, *every evening*, when I come home, there's our Clara in the kitchen with her mother, drinking tea."

He turned his dull and melancholy eyes to mine. "Tea—and beer—and a warm corner by the stove—but Ellie's out of it. Ellie's going East."

I wish I could give you the tone in which he said "East."

But I made no answer, for we had to stop then to bid good-by to Ellie, who was going straight to Tilbury from the registrar's. We all kissed her, and very small and frail and fair she looked by the side of her radiant young husband.

She clung to her mother, and I was afraid that she was going to overlook her father, who was standing apart in his usual diffident way, and was certainly unnoticed by any of the others. She saw him, however, and ran to him and hugged him; I was glad to remember it, later.

I watched them drive away in their taxi, and I confess that I could not share Mr. Braggs's opinion at that moment as to the kitchen. It appeared to my mind a snug place, a safe place, a far better place for that pretty ignorant child than the one to which she was going.

A few weeks later, however, my mother and myself were obliged to admit that perhaps Ellie's marriage had been fortunate after all, because, just a day or two after her first happy letters arrived from Egypt, Mr. Braggs was drowned.

He had gone one lunch time, as usual, to the docks, and he must have lunched too well that day, for he had fallen into the water. No one could be found who had witnessed the accident—the biting cold and dense fog accounted, perhaps, for that; but his cap was recovered, and an old wallet, and a little picture of Ellie as a baby, floating between the slimy piles of an abandoned wharf.

There was an investigation, and some hint of foul play, but nothing came of it. His body was never found; it had drifted down with the tide, the water men said; drifted, perhaps, in the wake of one of those Eastern ships. I felt that he would have liked that.

IV

THIS, then, was the story of Ellie Braggs, as far as we knew it; the sequel my mother had begged me to find out. It appeared to her that it would be quite easy for me to get into close touch with the wife of an orthodox Mohammedan, and, if need be, remove her from her husband's house and send her home to England. Her attitude was simple, and summed up in four words: "What's a consul for?"

It seemed less simple to me as I sat in Shepherd's lounge, talking to my friend Khalil Bey. By devious routes I led around to the subject of Mahmoud. Khalil, who knows every one, knew him, of course.

"A young *effendi*, very fat, remarkable teeth?" he said.

"He wasn't fat thirteen years ago, but the teeth are unmistakable."

"I know him. He has an estate in Minia province. Very lucrative, I believe. He spends most of his time here, though. What you would call 'a lively lad.'" Khalil smiled. "Why are you interested?"

"Have you ever seen his wife?"

"My dear Scott, naturally I have never seen his wife."

"I beg your pardon. You see, he married an English girl—my mother was greatly interested in her—and I wondered if it would be possible to meet her, see how she's getting on, and so forth."

Khalil smiled again. I knew then exactly what was in his mind, and that no protestation or argument of mine would ever convince him that the interest in Ellie was my mother's and not my own.

I felt my face growing warm. "Damn Ellie!" I thought, confusedly. My friend's eyes twinkled.

"Take my advice," he said, "and leave it alone. You'll only stir up trouble, and find your resignation suddenly accepted." Rather fervently I concurred, and changed the subject with all speed; but a few evenings later I met Khalil in the Continental bar, slightly flushed from an excellent dinner, and with his small bright eyes again atwinkle. He was, at all times, an incurable romanticist, and to-night he loved all the world.

"Mahmoud Effendi is in Alex," he informed me, over a yellow chartreuse, "and the English wife is at the *esba*. You go to Minia station, and then take a car about twelve or fifteen miles inland—near the Yusefi Canal."

"Nonsense," I protested. "What have you got in that mad brain of yours? I'm not going near Minia."

"Not if you're wise—or value your career. But you'll remember—near the Yusefi." He caught sight of a friend, and was off, turning to wave a hand to me from the door.

And of course he was right. I did go. I got a week-end leave, and I went to Minia town, and there I hired an ancient car, whose parts were firmly tied together with string, and set out at a breakneck speed along the canal banks.

It was market day, and the narrow way, edged upon one side by sparse mimosa trees, and on the other by nothing at all save the steep and crumbling bank of the deep canal, was thronged with villagers.

There were unveiled women, stepping with swift grace, balancing on their heads round flat baskets filled with great cheeses; donkeys laden with every imaginable produce; loads so great that very little of the donkey himself could be discerned; flocks of small brown goats driven by baby girls in long pink frocks; pariah dogs slinking and snapping; wandering ducks and chickens; huge lumbering buffalo ridden by tiny boys; occasional strings of camels.

There were young men in tight skullcaps and flapping galabiehs, laughing and chattering, their fingers linked in one another's;

and old men walking in stately pride, their beautifully folded turbans, gray beards, and flowing cloaks imparting to their progress a classic dignity which no act of their own could destroy—and they performed many which a gentleman does not perform, say, on St. James's Street or Piccadilly.

Past and through them all, animals, children, old people and young, we clattered and crashed; never slackening speed, hurtling from side to side, my driver honking and cursing and shouting, and ourselves pursued by loud maledictions which held little malice, and cheerful, if obscene, advice. Presently we turned inland upon what was a trifle more like a road leading out toward the western desert, between illimitable fields of corn and cotton and vivid berseem.

We passed through small mud villages, where children and chickens scuttered away at our approach, and very old women squatted in the low doorways and watched us with blank eyes. Then, at last, toward three o'clock, we plunged into a rough track leading through an immense plantation of sugar cane which hemmed us in on both sides, and when we emerged we could see the broad canal with a fringe of date palms on the near bank, and on the farther a cluster of small brown dots that were the tents of gypsies.

"By the grace of Allah, we have arrived," my driver announced, and I thoroughly agreed with him.

The rest house, shaded by palms, with a straggling purple clematis over its narrow veranda, was on the very edge of the canal, and was in itself a sufficient excuse for my sojourn there, for all newcomers to Egypt want to see the Yusefi—the old canal which tradition says was built by the order of Joseph, the son of Rachael.

I had already learned from the driver that Mahmoud's estate lay only a quarter of a mile upstream. Leaving my servant to put things to rights, I set out along the bank of the water, in the golden sunlight. I had no fixed plan in mind, but I knew that by some means I was going to see Ellie. It was curiosity mainly, I am afraid, but I hope it was something more than that.

At a bend of the canal some women were filling their water jars, and I sat down at a discreet distance to watch them. When they were gone, walking in a file that was like an ancient frieze silhouetted against

the deep blue sky, I saw that one of them remained, sitting forlornly in the sand, staring out across the desert.

Suddenly she arose and turned, and I saw her face in the same instant that she saw mine. It was Ellie.

V

CAN I ever forget what happened next! She shrieked, she came flying toward me, a tangle of long skirts and black veil, and flung herself into my arms.

"Mr. Arnold! Mr. Arnold! You've come for me—oh, my God, it's Mr. Arnold!" She broke into a fit of wild sobbing, and I held her close, sensing her terrible thinness. After a moment she stopped crying, straightened, and caught my wrist with nervous fingers.

"Quick, this way," she said urgently, and drew me into a thicket of sugar cane, where we were completely hidden. I sat down on the ground, and she sat, too, facing me. Ellie!

Her face was thin and drawn, the skin harsh and yellowish. The color was all drained away from her lips and eyes. She had lost a front tooth, and kept drawing her upper lip down to hide the ugly gap. Her neck was as stringy as an old woman's, and her lovely hair was bleached and dry and streaked here and there with a purplish tinge as if she had vainly tried, with henna, to bring back its lost gold.

"However did you come here?" she demanded eagerly.

"I'm in—in Cairo, now," I stammered. "I—I came up here to see you—to see if you were all right."

"Have you seen him?"

"Mahmoud? No. Is here here?"

"He's away," she said shortly; "good job, too." Her small face tightened as she spoke.

"Ellie, what is it? You aren't happy—"

"Happy!" she laughed harshly. "It's hell, Mr. Arnold."

"Tell me," I begged; "that's what I'm here for. Perhaps you can go home."

"Home!" cried Ellie. "*Home*. Oh, Mr. Arnold, talk to me about it! I think and think till I nearly go mad. I'll go mad some day. I think of the rain, and the shiny streets, and the lamps in the fog—and coming in out of the cold into the kitchen. I think of the old stove, and the woolly rug, and Clara there; and maybe kippers for tea. Funny things to make

you cry—kippers! You—you'll think I'm funny, Mr. Arnold."

I shook my head. I didn't think it at all funny. She was rocking herself to and fro; a native trick that turned me quite cold to see.

"Ellie, Ellie, try to be quiet. Tell me what is the matter? What have they done to you?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, calming herself with an effort. "Nothing much, really. It's the sun, and the heat, and the smells, partly, and the voices of the women and children."

"Have you any children?"

"Me? No. *They* have. Like rabbits, is what I say."

"*They*?"

"Them. Three of 'em. He keeps 'em all—he's good like that—and their relations, too. I don't think he knows himself how many there are in that great barrack of a house. Swarming all over. Like black beetles."

"Has Mahmoud other wives?"

"Not wives. No, he's never done that. I'm his wife—the only one." She spoke with a sort of dreary pride.

"You see," she went on, "it was all right at first. I was so happy, the sunshine and all. I loved it then, and Mahmoud—he—I—" She strangled a sob. "Well, it didn't last long. The sun spoiled my skin, and my hair got all funny like, and Fatama—she was the first—was always around. She waited on me. I was a real lady then, I can tell you; but Fatama, she was a bad girl, if ever I saw one, and—oh, well, maybe if I'd had a baby—I don't know—"

"I see," I said gently. "But how is it now, Ellie? What is your life? How are you treated?"

"Like dirt!" Ellie cried vehemently. "He's away most of the time. Oh, no, sir, he's never touched me. He wouldn't hurt a fly—not that way. Besides"—oh, eternal cry of Eve—"he doesn't care enough about me to touch me! I'm just the cat in the corner to him. And *they*—they laugh in my face, and paint themselves up, and jingle their silly bangles, and his mother sides with whoever he likes best—the double-faced old cat. They'd order me about if they dared."

"Oh, yes," she went on, shrilly, "poor old faded Ellie—shove 'er about—but I keep my place, Mr. Arnold! I'm his wife, and I let them know it."

I caught an echo of Mrs. Braggs here, and was glad to hear it. She had gone far, this girl, since that day when we bade her good-by in her tremulous bridal beauty; but she had not gone under. Would she hold out? She was thirty years old. What of her at forty—at fifty?

Dim horrors, unguessed by her, seized on my imagination. Suddenly I felt that, career or no career, I must save this bit of wreckage that was again rocking itself to and fro in front of me.

"Ellie!" I cried. "You're going home. I'll see to it."

"Home." She said it again as she had said it before.

"Yes, home. We'll do it openly, if we can. If not, if Mahmoud refuses—"

"He wouldn't refuse," Ellie said quickly; "he'd let me go fast enough. Call it a visit, he would; but he wouldn't care how long the visit lasted. Oh, Mr. Arnold—home! But I can't go. I can't go."

"Nonsense! Of course you can."

"No, I can't. Not while he lives. He'd never go with me, and I can't leave him."

"Can't leave him?" I echoed, aghast. "Then you still—you are in love—"

"In love? With Mahmoud? My Gawd!" said Ellie, sufficiently.

"Then what—"

"It ain't him, sir. Oh, me, oh, me; what shall I do? Mahmoud mightn't keep him if I wasn't here—his mother's as jealous as she can be, nasty old vixen, I'd never be sure. No, I can't do it, Mr. Arnold."

"But what on earth are you talking about?" I demanded.

To my amazement, Ellie broke into a peal of shaken laughter. She jumped to her feet. "I'll show you," she replied.

VI

HALF laughing, half crying, she led me along a track in the sugar cane, at the end of which rose a whitewashed mud wall. There was a door in this wall which she opened. It led into a little garden, very still and sunny, completely inclosed on three sides by the white wall, and on the fourth by the blank pink side of the house.

There were three small orange trees in the garden, in flower and fruit and leaf at the same time, as is their delightful way, and an acacia hedge encircled it. There was no grass, but the dry, sandy soil was not unsightly, and it was dotted with beds of flowers, English flowers, stocks, and

Shirley poppies, and roses, planted in well-watered earth that must have been brought with loving toil from the bed of the Yusefi.

"You can come in, sir," said Ellie, as I hesitated at the gate. "No one comes here unless I say so. It's my garden, and his."

His? I stared. There was a man in the garden, an old Egyptian, dressed in a yellow silk galabieh, over which flowed a voluminous black burnoose. His turban was of silk, white and spotless. He had a long white beard.

He was sitting on a small, gayly colored prayer rug, and he was smoking a water pipe such as the rich merchants smoke in the cafés of the mousky, but which is seldom seen on an up-country farm. He looked, if I may so express it, more Arab than any Arab I had ever seen.

"There he is," said Ellie, an indescribable note of pride, amusement, and affectionate scorn in her tone.

It was Mr. Braggs.

He gave no sign of being aware of us, although I am certain that he had both seen and recognized me the moment I came through the doorway. Ellie went up to him.

"Father, here's Mr. Arnold come to see you."

Mr. Braggs removed the pipe. As I hurried toward him with outstretched hand, a dozen questions on my lips, he raised his arms to the level of his forehead and swept them outward.

"*Salaam, effendi*," said Mr. Braggs.

I turned to Ellie, who was dragging forward a wicker chair for me.

"Yes, it's him," she said, in answer to my look. "He followed me out, he did, the artful old rascal, and left his clothes to show he'd been drowned. Been here ever since. Did you ever?"

"But your mother—" I began.

"I've never told her. It wouldn't have done," replied Ellie.

"She'd 'a' come after me, Mr. Arnold, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Braggs, suddenly becoming an Englishman again, and speaking with great earnestness. "She'd 'a' had me back in a week. So Ellie and her husband, they said all right. Mum's the word."

Ellie took up the tale. "Mahmoud's been awfully good to him. Took him right in; treated like a prince, he is, really. I'll say that for Ay-rabs, they're good to all their relations, doesn't matter how many comes and lives with them."

"Well—I'm damned!" I exploded. Ellie laughed. "But I'm thoroughly pleased to see you, Mr. Braggs," I went on. "You gave your friends a bad shock, you know. Your poor wife—"

"She's one as would do well as a widow," put in Mr. Braggs hastily. I couldn't deny it. Widowhood had been an asset of which that sharp-tongued lady had made much.

"Better for both, that's what I say," commented Ellie.

Certainly it had been better for Mr. Braggs. He looked well, and very clean; he had clearly given up drinking beer; his eyes were bright, and his expression one of childlike content.

"The life suits you?" I asked.

"Suits me? It's heaven, Mr. Arnold. Sunshine and quiet, and warm air, and the smells—orange flowers and the incense in the mosque—I've embraced the true faith, sir—and hot dust and curry all mixed up—what I call the smell of the East. It gets into the blood, Mr. Arnold."

"And what do you do all day?"

"Well, there's always the café, sir. I enjoy café life."

"In the village square," Ellie explained. "There's a café there, and they've got the little tables out under the trees. All the old ones go there at eleven and at six or so and play dominoes. Father's a wonder at dominoes."

"But, Mr. Arnold," Mr. Braggs questioned, "what are you doing out here?"

I explained.

"A good post, sir?"

"Very, thanks."

"*Hamdulillah!*" exclaimed Mr. Braggs. I had no very clear idea as to what "*hamdulillah*" meant, and I don't believe he had either; but it seemed a good word, and I bowed assent. Mr. Braggs took up his pipe again and relapsed into meditation.

I remembered the old vacant-eyed staring of his kitchen days. Had he really changed, or was it simply the beard, the turban, the robes, that gave to his listlessness that quality of dignified and profound abstraction?

"I hope they all like him, and are kind to him," I said to Ellie.

"They are, Mr. Arnold. Everybody thinks the world of him. They make a lot of old men out here if they're nicely dressed and have a few piasters to spend, and I see to that. Then he helps old Raghab Ali,

the *wakeel*, with the accounts, and he helps me in my garden, and he makes fishing lines for the children and takes them along the canal. Oh, yes, he's all right and happy—my word! Thinks he's Father Abraham himself, he does."

We sat on, chatting. I told Ellie all that I could about London, and the fogs, and the wet, shiny streets. Mr. Braggs paid no attention to all this, but he came to life again presently in his own startling way. "*Hut chái*," he said imperiously to Ellie, "*chái ou leban*."

VII

ELLIE giggled, but arose obediently and went into the house through a door in the pink wall. She did not bring out tea and milk; she brought thick, sweet coffee in tiny cups, and a brass and silver box of cigarettes.

The shadows lengthened. Hoopoes were calling from the roof to their mates in the acacias. The scent of the orange blossoms was sweet and heavy.

From an inner court came a sound of voices and a tinkling laugh. I glanced at Ellie, who looked very wan and frail in the shadow.

"It's *them*," she said with a vicious click of her teeth. Mr. Braggs made a stately gesture with his right hand.

"The—the concubines," he said, magnificently. I was caught by a spasm of inward laughter. *Concubines*. And he liked them to be there! They were, for him, the ultimate touch. They completed the Eastern picture.

I arose. "I must be getting back," I said. "I'll try to come and see you again, officially, next time, Mr. Braggs."

"Quite so, sir. I won't mention to the household your visit of to-day. I couldn't deny Ellie the sight of you this once, so sudden and all as it was, but it might be misunderstood. We've strict ideas about our women out here."

Then, relapsing again: "You'll say nothing about me, Mr. Arnold? I couldn't go back, sir! I'd drown in good earnest first."

I reassured him: "I won't say one word. It's no affair of mine. Good-by." I held out my hand. Mr. Braggs shook it warmly, then repeated his earlier gesture.

"*Aleikum salaam!*" said Mr. Braggs.

Ellie went with me to the gate. "You see," she said. "I can't go."

"But Ellie—"

"No." Her eyes were bright with tears, her mouth tenderly smiling, and of all the expressions I had seen on her poor faded face that day, that is the one I like to remember. There was pity in it.

"No. Not while he lives. I'll stick it out. Did you ever see any one so absurd—and so happy?"

"But later," I urged; "keep in touch with me—later you'll go home; you *shall*, Ellie."

"That's as it may be. Perhaps. You'd better go now, sir. Some of *them* may

come poking and prying up on the roof. Oh, no, don't you worry about me. There's things I could tell about them! I'm all right, Mr. Arnold. But thank you for coming. It's done me good, I think."

"Dear Ellie! I'll come again if I can."

"Best not," she replied to that. "I'll carry on, remembering this. Good-by, Mr. Arnold."

"Good-by, Ellie."

She closed the gate, and I hurried away down the dim track between the tall green ranks of the sugar cane.

Stars of Desire

A DISCIPLE OF THE STAGE'S MAKE-BELIEVE DISCOVERS THE FAR-AWAY WORLD OF REALITY

By Nels Leroy Jorgensen

IN the days when Tony Pastor's theater cast the pale white glow of its flickering arc lamps over a patch of Bowery sidewalk, Jack Keate had his initiation into "the profession." In the uniform of a messenger boy, which was not a stage costume, but reality, he had taken his first bow across gas jet footlights after a song and a clog taught him by his father, who, in turn, had learned it in Ireland before the Keates migrated to the United States.

Jack Keate had not been an instant success. Nothing convinced him that he should go on with his chosen career. Nothing, that is, but the smell of the grease paint from the dressing rooms, the thud of flimsy scenery, and the hush of back stage before the curtain went up.

He had gone on, from one thing to another, following the winding road of a trouper, and watching the variety stage gradually transform itself into a game of big business and bigger theaters, with mapped out routes; and finally to that analogous thing termed "refined vaudeville" on the program.

If he worked, in his later days, for anything beyond the work itself, it was for his daughter. Keate, having been deprived of

an education, had seen to it that Elsie had hers. At her mother's death, ten years before, she had been whisked away to a private school up-State.

Jack Keate was aware of his limitations. But Elsie was a lady, he knew. He had been determined that she should be that. What he failed to realize was, that Elsie couldn't possibly be anything else; and so he was conscious, dimly, of a feeling akin to disappointment, as at each vacation time, when she returned to him, she remained unchanged.

She didn't quite speak his language, and she carried herself with a kind of delicate, unstudied graciousness of manner that he had seen women on the stage attempt often in vain; but, aside from that, she had failed him. She entirely lacked arrogance. She resolutely insisted upon waiting on him and doing the cooking in their little up-town flat which he had always retained, and she treated his friends with a quiet respect that almost angered him.

Very intent was he on making Elsie something that she was not. Of course, she was a beautiful creature, with her deep blue eyes, and red, sensitive lips, and a slender, careless grace that was like a lily stem.

But she was not for the stage. On that point, disappointed although he was in her failure to live up to his specifications of a lady, Keate was firm. And because she was not for the stage, he decided that he must have done with it, too.

"I'm getting old, my boy," he told his young friend, Hal Stark, one day at their club. "The offices are going to begin forgetting me soon, and old Jack Keate is going to wake up some morning and find himself a has-been. It's about time for me to quit the stage."

Hal leaned over, his black eyes laughing understandingly. He was one of the younger men in the profession, and one of the few to whom Keate would concede any possibilities.

"I'd hate to tell you you were lying, Jack," he offered.

"What do you mean?" Keate demanded.

"I mean that it's not that at all—it's Elsie you're thinking of. I'll admit that I haven't been able to think of anything else since I met her, but that's reasonable. You think, because you've given her a 'fine education,' she wants to see you something else besides an old vaudeville actor." The young man laughed derisively.

Keate shook his grizzled head—a head that was still handsome. At the age of fifty years, he had retained a good deal of his youth; now he was like a boy who finds his kite string slipping through his fingers, and tries to keep a grip on it.

"It's that, I suppose—but not all that, either, Hal," he affirmed. "I'd like to be a gentleman—a real, fine gentleman, for Elsie; but I can't. And now—well, it's time I took up something else, Hal. Maybe I can write—or produce." He looked up hopefully.

Hal shook his head. "You can't if you don't try, that's a cinch. Signed up with anything?"

"Not yet. Murray wants me to do an old man's part in a new sketch he's taking out."

"Don't accept." Hal lit a cigarette and moved over confidentially on the lounge. "Murray's skit is a foregone failure, and can't get a thing but Western time. Keep your eye on me, Jack; I'm heading to show some action."

"New act?" asked Keate, interestedly.

"Nothing like it. I'm going in business instead."

Hal Stark entered upon a recital of his

plans for opening a new producing office which would buy, produce, and control acts; backing him was August Baumgartner, silent partner in a number of enterprises on the Rialto. He wound up his enthusiastic speech by asking when Elsie was coming home.

"That's the fifth time you've asked today," Keate commented. "To-morrow, I've told you—for keeps."

"I know; but the time, man!"

Jack Keate looked at him and laughed. "All right, son; you can come to dinner with us. We're going to eat in style—as soon as she gets off the train."

Hal caught his breath. "I appreciate that, old man. Can I go with you to the station?"

Keate nodded his assent, but he looked up at the younger man with doubtful eyes.

"I say, Hal, you're not planning to take her away from me, just as soon as I've got her back again?"

Hal compressed his lips. "I certainly would, Jack, if I thought I could. But Elsie—" He sighed. "Well, I just love her, Jack, and I don't mind if you know it; but I'm afraid that's to be all. Elsie wouldn't be foolish enough to marry a young kid from this game of ours; she's too good."

Keate got up and sternly shook his finger. "Don't fool yourself about Elsie, boy. I'm about beginning to realize for myself that she's just foolish enough to be—a thoroughbred!"

Hal Stark stared—and wondered. He had never before seen puzzled, groping old Jack Keate so certain of anything he said. He thought about it all the next day, during his conference with August Baumgartner, while he found his plans maturing and the new organization making ready to get under way.

His name was on the door of a tiny office in West Forty-Seventh Street when he left off work that afternoon and hurried over to meet Jack Keate at the Grand Central Station. And Keate's words were on his mind. A crisp, bracing chill was in the air, hazy with the promise of an early autumn.

Suppose—suppose it were really possible for Elsie to—to marry him, he asked himself, mentally hesitating over the joy contained within the phrase. He knew she liked him a little bit; a lot, she had admitted when he had seen her the last time she had been home for the holidays.

Of course, he had little enough to offer now, but if his plans went through—why, he'd be one of the names on Broadway! Well—in vaudeville circles, anyway, and that meant a bigger measure of success than was given to most men under thirty years of age.

"So, Hal, you're not going to be an actor any more!" That was how Elsie Keate received the news. "Oh, Hal, I'm so glad. I know you can get up to the big things."

She was all he had remembered her, although he had not seen her in nearly a year—graceful, beautiful, dainty.

Hal went on pouring out his plans to Elsie, during dinner, while Jack Keate sat back and watched them—watched her blue, eager eyes on the shining eyes of the boy, and her parted, enthusiastic lips. Sometimes Keate would smile, and sometimes his eyes would get their usual quizzical, wondering look.

"It's terrible, daddy," Elsie said, turning to him. "I've been so interested in Hal's plans that we've positively neglected you. Now you must tell me all about what you've been doing."

"Waiting for you to come home, mostly," he grinned. "Just like Hal." She pouted. He went on. "I'm not exactly sure just what I have been doing, my dear. Mostly, I'm—writing a little act."

He said it cautiously. Elsie's eyes opened. She demanded details. Hal listened with interest.

"Started it last night, after I left you, Hal. Maybe I'll give you the chance to put it on if you like it."

"What's in it?" Hal demanded keenly. "Not dramatic, I hope."

"Comedy." Jack Keate paused and nodded, as if to himself. "Yes, I think you'd call it comedy. But you've got to wait till it's finished."

They waited, Hal busy in forming plans and carrying through his first ideas for the new office. Between times, he was with Elsie, and sometimes with both the girl and her father. The frank pleasure she had at being with him gave him hopes, but he dared not put them into words. What if Elsie said no!

He tried the production of a team act, for black-face comedians, but it was far from the success he anticipated. The act was finally booked, but only over a mid-West circuit. His returns were small.

"If I could only get one big time piece

going, it would start things," Hal told Elsie, seeking her out naturally when the final returns came. "One good act would mean a steady income, and besides, the big timers would be flocking to my office looking for work. That's what I need—material!"

He swung about in his chair toward Keate, who was in the adjoining room, his shoulders bent unaccustomedly over a desk.

"Say, Jack, let's see that act of yours. If there's a big time line in it, I'll grab it!"

Keate smiled. "I was just going over it," he said. "It's about ready, I guess." He offered the script with all the hesitancy of a novice writer.

"Read it aloud," Hal suggested. "You know best the expression that should go into your own lines."

Timidly, Jack Keate began. Hal lit a cigarette, and Elsie settled comfortably on the lounge beside him. They listened.

Before the reading had continued far, Hal Stark recognized that Jack Keate had put himself into the sketch. Comedy, he had called it. Well, comedy it was, with a good measure of pathos thrown in; the kind of comedy that brings tears with laughter.

It was the story of an old vaudeville actor who considered himself too good for his parts, and who had an inextinguishable yearning to play tragedy. Hal did not look at Elsie for fear she would understand, but he told himself: "So *that* has been the star of desire that old Jack saw!"

It was a good story, a clever story—unobtrusively clever, with the brilliancy that only life's lights and shadows can give. In the wind-up, the old player had his chance at the big part, and failed, as was fore-ordained. He failed tragically—or humorously—as the particular audience might decide. The decision of Broadway sometimes is the derision of the "provinces."

Hal sprang to his feet at the finish. "I'll take it, Jack!" he exclaimed. "It'll stand some polishing, but we both know the 'catch lines' they want injected here and there. Will you turn it over to me?"

"Can you really make it go, Hal?"

"Watch me. It'll need an actor to do it—a real one!" Hal swiftly considered the possibilities. "I don't suppose you want to go out with it?" he ventured.

Jack Keate shook his head. "No more! With the royalties from two or three acts coming my way, and maybe a contract here and there to produce a piece—why, I can

live in clover, Hal! I told you I had quit the boards for good."

"I think you're foolish," Hal said, earnestly, "with a vehicle like this for you. But I can see your point. If you want to take on the production, I'll turn it all over to you as soon as it's ready."

"Done!" the older man decided.

After Stark had gone, Keate turned to his daughter.

"I should have done this years ago, girly," he remarked. He took her in his arms, tenderly. "But you'll be proud of your old pop when he's a regular playwright, won't you?" He gazed down at her fondly.

Elsie gently shook her head, her deep blue eyes soft and tender. "No more than I am now, dear," she said; and smilingly added: "I'm afraid you'll have to learn more about women, daddy, if you're going to be a great playwright."

Keate nodded without conviction. He couldn't quite understand, but he was satisfied. Whether Elsie admitted it or not, she would be proud of him when he had attained to prominence in this new profession he had entered.

He worked furiously over the details of production. An ordinary vaudeville sketch usually takes two weeks to make ready; producers are anxious for it to earn money, and actors rarely rehearse longer than that without salary, if it can be helped. But "The Big Chance" occupied three and a half weeks in rehearsal.

At the end of the second week, Hal, at the author's request, released the actor he had chosen to play the part of the old vaudeville troupier. In his place, Jack Keate hired Andy Danes, a real old-timer with whom he had played.

Hal watched preparations dubiously, catching at times some of Keate's fervid enthusiasm, but mostly he was doubtful. As always, he went to Elsie.

"I told him it would take a real actor to do that thing right," he said, with conviction; "and it will. By that I meant a great actor. Whether Jack is great or not, he's the character itself."

They were in Keate's apartment uptown. Elsie shook her head, smilingly.

"Dad doesn't want to be an actor. I think, Hal, I even see his point. The road ahead for him has no goal, no end—except obscurity."

"Of course, I understand that!" Hal

broke in impatiently. "If I didn't, I'd accuse him of being crazy. It's a chance any old troupier on Broadway would jump at—a sure fire, big time success, if it's handled right. And Jack turns it down—because he wants to be a gentleman!" he finished contemptuously.

Elsie put her hands on his shoulders. "You can't convince him, or change him, Hal. Forget it, won't you?"

Her voice was soft, her hands caressing, and for an instant he had an almost overwhelming desire to sweep her into his arms. But he held back.

"I wish I could make you understand all that it means to me," he said, his voice low. "Elsie, if this act goes over, it's the beginning of my success; and when that time comes—I wonder if you know what I shall want to ask you?"

Her eyes were alight, and she smiled slowly.

"I hope it succeeds, Hal. And I—I think maybe I'd rather not have you wait so long."

He gasped; his heart took sudden fire. The next instant Elsie was in his arms. Then his impulsive embrace ceased, and his eyes grew somber. His head bent, and his lips just touched her forehead, gently and reverently.

"With that promise in my heart, my sweet," he whispered, "I can do anything. I'll make fortune come my way."

But he was forced into inaction. As he had no other ventures on hand, he had to sit back and watch Jack Keate produce his own work, according to their arrangement. There were three other characters, and these maintained their parts well. Hal had a great deal of time to spend in worrying and fuming over "The Big Chance." How apt the title was, he thought at times.

Andy Danes was considerably better than their first choice for the lead, but Hal had already despaired of him when he was notified that a three day date had been booked for the act at a small theater in New Jersey, during which time agents for the vaudeville routes would be on hand to see its effect on an audience.

Andy Danes was a vaudevillist. A part was a part to him. He put into his characterization Forty-Seventh Street slang and Times Square mannerisms; but to Hal's eyes he failed in a certain pathetic dignity. Stark frankly viewed the opening date with fear. Keate, however, was confident.

With Elsie, they journeyed out into the New Jersey hills to the little playhouse which was to see the try out. Hal had already "caught" the afternoon show. Andy Danes impressed him with his futility more than ever. Intrinsically, the man was not the part; he had never possessed the ideals that Keate's character had—he could only act them.

At night, the three stood in the wings and watched in silence. There were other acts on the bill, other performers swinging hurriedly past them, but they paid no heed. They waited for their act, and, while it was on, held their breaths. It was only afterward that Hal realized how hard Elsie had been squeezing his hand.

The curtain came down on Danes's last line—a line which, in the proper hands, Hal had been confident, would bring applause. It fell on unresponsive ears. The three stood stunned in the wings, while an ineffective murmur of comment came from the house and died down almost instantly.

Failure!

Danes, shaking his head, walked up to Jack Keate. "It wasn't me, was it, old man?"

Keate looked away. "Guess not, Andy. Must be the show."

Danes went off to remove his make-up. The other members of the cast hung about for a minute in an effort to discover, if possible, what effect this reception would have on the future of the act; but presently they were gone, too.

Hal waited for the agents. He was prepared for discouraging news. Only one came in—Pete English, a little man who booked little acts. Hal refused his offer for a far-Western route. He waited again.

A few minutes later he realized that the agents who had been notified had, after the manner of agents, failed to appear as expected. They would be on hand the succeeding night, without a doubt. There was a moment to prepare, then, for the inevitable disaster.

To-morrow night would be only a repetition of this, he knew. There was no escape—none. With Elsie, he boarded the train for home. Keate waited a few moments for Andy Danes.

"The worst of it is," Hal burst out at length to the girl, "there's absolutely nothing wrong with the thing. In the proper hands, it would be one of the hits of all the circuits."

Elsie made no reply, except to press his hand. Keate followed them up the stairs a few minutes after they had reached his apartment. He tried to be cheerful.

"I wish," said Hal, gloomily, "that the agents had been there. I'd feel better if they'd given us our sentence to-night."

"They'll be out in front to-morrow," Keate prophesied. "Andy promised to stop in and see Garrison in the morning; Greenbaum, too."

Hal sighed and picked up his hat. "Well, at least we're sure of having it over then," he said. "If Garrison won't take it, there's not much use in sending it West, Jack."

"I suppose not," Keate agreed, slumping into a chair. He looked up, his eyes questioning as ever. "Gosh, I can't see what's wrong, Hal. It's got everything!"

"Except the man who knows what to do with—everything!" Hal returned. He went out.

Keate nodded agreement. He was beginning to realize that fact. Presently he went to bed. There was little, indeed, to hope for; little to be gained by telling himself that it was not the fault of the act. Small chance now remained of becoming the much coveted gentleman. His first work was a failure. Hal would be broke in producing it.

He wished he had gone on in Andy's place; he knew what could be done with that part. But that action would be to acknowledge a failure in his attempt to break away from the shackles of his profession.

He and Hal were at the theater early the next afternoon. There was only an average audience in front, no criterion one way or another.

The first act went on. "The Big Chance" was fifth, next to the closing. But Andy Danes should have made his appearance by the time the first curtain went up. The back stage telephone rang, and one of the stage hands called for Hal. He went to the telephone spiritlessly; perhaps the agents had heard of the fiasco on the preceding night, and were not even going to look them over.

When he answered, Garrison's voice on the other end of the wire seemed about to confirm this idea. But Hal grew taut at the message.

"I just learned that Andy Danes got his ankle caught in the elevator door as he was leaving my office building," Garrison said. "He refused to go to a hospital, but

he can't show this afternoon. I suppose it won't do any good for me to come out, will it?"

Keate had come close. Hal stammered out the news while Garrison waited. At first the old player's face blanched.

"Tell him to come anyway," he said. "We'll cancel the turn for this afternoon, and maybe Andy'll be in good enough shape to appear to-night. If he can't, I can go on myself."

Hope leaped into Hal's eyes, but the flame quickly died down. He repeated the message to Garrison, who promised to come, and hung up.

"They won't buy an act on the strength of a retired actor who is better than the part," he said gloomily. Then he shrugged. "Anyhow, we'll finish up in style."

He spent the remainder of the afternoon in a dark corner back stage, defying fire laws and smoking innumerable cigarettes while waiting for news from Andy Danes. His mind ran ahead. His loss on "The Big Chance," even if Baumgartner didn't balk on sharing it with him, was heavy. Was he, like Jack Keate, doomed to the playbills and the two-a-day for life?

Elsie found him there when she arrived on a commuters' train that evening.

"How'd you happen to come?" he demanded excitedly.

"I wanted to, Hal," she said quietly. "I knew what you were up against." She took a seat beside him, shyly. "And—and I sort of felt I'd want to be with you."

He kissed her finger tips, conscious of a curious exaltation that assuaged even his deep despair. After all, he was young, and Elsie loved him. She must love him; that was why she had come. Women of Elsie's fine sort, he reflected, did such things.

Andy Danes, the telephone announced half an hour later, would be laid up in bed for two or three weeks. Hal made his regrets, and promised to stop in the following day. Jack Keate prepared to go on.

The preceding acts on the bill were run through. There was a good house in front, a receptive audience. The curtain went up on "The Big Chance," Keate waiting in the wings for his cue, and Hal and Elsie crowded together beside the electrician's box.

But as soon as Keate appeared on the stage, Hal became conscious of a new, unexpected force. The lines began to get across the footlights; there were laughs and

chuckles. Some one said "Great!" in a far carrying whisper. Hal held himself tense; he knew that Jack Keate had accomplished that most difficult of all feats—he had his audience "with him."

The long, serried rows of bodies were leaning forward eagerly. Through a slit beside him, Hal watched their faces.

"They understand it!" he whispered exultantly to Elsie. "They like him!"

Swiftly the story of the old actor unfolded. Keate was not acting; he was himself. He carried along, without any effort, the pathos and the tragedy, and all the subtle humor of his part. He was the old actor himself, striving toward his ideal, an ideal impossible of attainment.

Hal began to sense more than ever how Keate had written himself into the poignant tale. The audience waited breathlessly for the finale.

What a tiny difference there was, Hal told himself, between the old player who had wanted to play Shakespeare and Jack Keate himself, moving about there behind the lights, who wanted to be a gentleman for his daughter's sake.

Andy Danes had not been able to do the part because he had not the ideals—the yearning toward that star of desire, far off and impossible, yet the thing that made men different. Stars of desire—every man had them; stars whose glitter blinded them to the things at hand which were infinitely nobler.

Jack Keate's blindness—the bitter blindness of not knowing that he had already achieved his peak; that in his work, which he had done well and faithfully, he had attained his highest destiny. All were out there, in the shambling, querulous movements of an actor about the stage. The other players had been forgotten.

The last lines came. Hal had forgotten the rapt audience, the agents watching with their eagle eyes, all that this night meant to him. He was engrossed completely in Jack Keate, and humbly adoring the man's artistry.

"So I have failed—or I have succeeded. Who knows?"

A poor line for the finish of a vaudeville sketch, but Hal Stark had believed in it. The curtain went down. The house was silent. Hal could no longer see the audience. That silence! He waited, palpitating, while Keate moved toward them in a sort of daze, wondering, querulous still.

Then there came a ripple of applause. It was taken up; it swept the house. In the next second there was a convulsive breath; and on the heels of it came an outburst more deep and abiding than any Stark had ever heard before. Keate, who had reached his daughter's side, stopped in his tracks, and his eyes, as he listened, were brimming with unwilling pride. His lips moved, but no one heard what he said.

Hal was gripping him by the shoulders, talking insanely. Elsie was kissing him. The stage manager permitted himself a grin. Never in his own experience had he witnessed such a reception.

But it had not died down.

"You'll have to go out and take a couple of bows," the manager said. The stage was dark.

Jack Keate stepped into the white spot light and bowed. The crowd cheered, stamped its feet, whistled—it was the pandemonium of true applause.

Hal moved away to hide his own confused emotions. In the calcium glare of the spot light, he had seen the tears glistening in Jack Keate's eyes. Oh, didn't he know, didn't he know?

He brought up sharply against the bulky form of Garrison, agent for the country's biggest routes. He collected himself; Garrison then drew behind his belligerent mask.

"How much do you want for it; straight time for at least seven months—probably two years before it's through? Contract."

Hal gasped. He stared hard at the

agent, unbelieving. Then he remembered. The applause out in front was dying down reluctantly. He found his senses and shook his head.

"That was Jack Keate playing, Garrison. I can't fill his place."

The agent exploded. "You don't mean to say you won't keep him in there—after to-night?"

"It's not that. He—he won't stay. Jack's—retired." He found the words hard to utter. They meant the crashing to atoms of all those glorious dreams of the future he had only a moment since, lost in the magnificence of Keate's success.

"Retired?" Garrison bellowed. "Star him! You mean to tell me Jack Keate won't play any more, when—"

"Who said I wouldn't play again?" Hal whirled at Keate's voice behind him. The old performer came up smiling, and slipped an arm over the young man's shoulder. "Son—after to-night, the only time I'm going to quit the boards again is when they drag me out feet first." He paused, his eyes wide and fixed over the heads of his companions.

"I've just found my place. It's out there where I was to-night. If your work is done well—I guess it doesn't matter what kind of work it is, does it, Hal?"

Hal shook his head, his own eyes misted, and found Elsie's fingers slipped into his. He grinned.

"It doesn't, Jack. I guess being a gentleman is just—just doing the job that fate hands to you—and doing it right"

SCARECROW

Who created this absurd
Relic to defeat the bird,
A greyhound of a man who sees
Not even spectrally the trees,

Who made of corrupt cloth and string,
So conspicuous a thing?
A landlord Scare-a-Crow who sits
Devoid of grace and shorn of wits,

But who, by trick and furbelow,
Scares that pilferer, the crow.
Knee deep in Midas gold, half Pan,
Immortals take you for a man.

Harold Vinal

Archie Horns Into the Spot Light

HERE IS A WEAPON, ALWAYS READY AT HAND, WHICH THE
NEGLECTED WIFE LONG HAS OVERLOOKED

By Blanche Goodman

WE were seated on the veranda of the Runnymede Country Club, Nita Osborne, Jane Edwards and I, waiting for our husbands to come off the links, and having a lovely, gossipy time.

"Hello, up there!" came a man's voice from the driveway.

The three of us turned with a sudden jerk. It was Archie Spaulding, red and somewhat disheveled. The roadster in which he had motored from the city stood chugging on the drive.

"Anybody seen An?" An—short for Anastasia—is Archie's wife.

"An's on the links somewhere," Nita answered. "At least," she added, "that's where she said she was going when she left here."

"If she comes to the club before I get back," called Archie, "will you tell her that I've gone over to the garage for a new shoe? Thanks." He backed down the drive and chugged off.

"Poor Archie!" Jane sighed. "As if An gives a hoot where he is."

"Poor!" echoed Nita. "You don't know what you're talking about, Jane. There isn't a happier husband in the village than Archie Spaulding. Have you ever seen his face when An strolls in with her latest moth, and heard him say 'Isn't she a great kid?' Poor! Humph!"

"But An isn't really golfing, is she?" I ventured.

"Of course not." There was a flavor of acerbity in Nita's voice.

"She's gone for a stroll with Larry Kempthorne. You know An's strolls. And Betty Kempthorne can sit and twiddle her thumbs until those two return. Don't

waste any pity on Archie. Commiserate with Betty, instead."

"I thought," murmured Jane, "that the affair with Larry had simmered down."

"It's on its last sim' now, I should say," responded Nita. "An's affairs are good for one season," she added dryly.

"You ought to know, Nita." And Jane cast a sly glance at her.

"Of course I know," bridled Nita. "And so do you, Jane Edwards."

Jane looked propitiatory.

"It wouldn't be so annoying," went on Nita, "if An used her wiles on outside material only; but this practicing on the husbands in her own set is—well, it's downright cannibalism."

"Sh-h!" I warned. An and Larry Kempthorne were coming up the walk.

An is a blonde, impinging on plumpness. She chopped off all her exotic given name, except the extreme west end, after Jane Edwards had rechristened her "Anæsthesia." That was the summer she had Ronnie, Jane's husband, in tow. It was then that An asked to be called by the monosyllable, as if she were, to quote dear old Dickens, nothing but a mere morsel of English grammar.

She was looking remarkably well, in a brown and cream golf outfit, and a ducky little sport hat. There was a slightly pensive, yet self-satisfied air about her, in contrast to Larry's sulky dejection.

"Lo, everybody!" An called out as they came up the steps. Larry nodded to us and went inside the casino.

"How cool and comfy you three look." An sank into a chair. "Know anything new? I'm dying to hear some gossip."

"Some one was just inquiring for you, An," drawled Jane. "A man."

"Who?" An turned a bright look of interest on Jane.

"Archie."

"Oh!" An sank back in her chair again. "I dare say he'll find me before long. Larry and I have been having a stroll—and a spat. More spat than stroll. He's so moody lately—"

The club steward approached. "You're wanted on the phone, Mrs. Spaulding."

It was after An had disappeared inside that Jane observed: "She grows more avid with age."

"An is just about ready for a new affair."

As Nita said this, her eyes were on me. Was there—or did I imagine it—a dark portent in their depths?

"Selena," and Nita's tones had the careful quality of a dentist about to extract a tooth, "do you realize that your Jim is the only man in our set who hasn't fallen for An's wiles yet?"

My laugh was not quite as nonchalant as I meant it to sound.

"Oh, Jim!" I said, with a there's-only-one-woman-for-my-husband manner.

"Forewarned is forearmed, my dear," and Nita nodded sagely. "If ever Jim comes home and tells you that An has been singing your praises, you may be certain that she is training the spot light on him. Ask Jane. She knows."

II

THE blow fell five nights later.

Jim and I had returned from a club co-tillion. He was emerging from the clothes closet with a coat hanger in his hand.

"I never saw An Spaulding look as well as she did to-night." His manner was enthusiastic.

"An did look well. *Very* well—for a woman of her age," I added as I picked up my hairbrush. The moment I made that remark, however, I regretted it.

"Meow!" grinned Jim.

"No—but, really, Jim," I protested, as I shook down my hair and began to brush it vigorously, "that dress was too flapperish for An."

"An's the sort who can wear flapperish things and get away with them." Jim's tone was almost defensive. "That bit of green tulle she had about her shoulders—did you notice?—Sort of springtime effect."

I felt a strange qualm. Jim Phelps noticing green tulle, and being intrigued by it, when he hasn't known for ages whether I'm wearing gunny sacking or velvet!

"We sat out two dances. Charming woman, An."

"Yes," I agreed, with carefully restrained enthusiasm.

"She's awfully fond of you, Selena."

It was a good thing my face was hidden in my hair.

"Couldn't praise you enough," he added.

After all, I told myself, before I finally dozed off to sleep that night, there was really nothing over which I need feel alarmed. By morning, however, I had changed my mind.

At nine thirty I called Nita's number.

"Terribly sorry to rout you out of bed so early, Nita," I apologized, "but this is an emergency."

Nita's audibly smothered yawn turned into a quick, sharp: "Emergency! Who's sick, Selena?"

"No one."

"Well, then—"

"Oh, Nita—you'll think I'm an utter fool when I tell you that it's something about—"

"Careful," warned Nita, breaking in. "Some one may be on the line."

In Runnymede, some one usually is.

"Don't mention names," she cautioned.

"It's in reference to what we spoke of last week on the club veranda—about somebody—praising wives."

There was a moment of what the fictionists call pregnant silence. I fancied I could hear Nita's brain working—or maybe it was the wire buzzing. Suddenly there was a comprehending "O-o-oh!"

"Now do you get it?"

"Of course I do, now. But—it isn't really—"

"Didn't you notice anything last night?"

"Well," Nita's response was guarded.

"I did—but only in a way. Selena—we can't talk on the phone like this. Come on over."

Half an hour later I was ushered into Nita's bedroom by the maid.

"Now, then," said Nita, breathlessly, as soon as the door was closed, "what is all this?"

"An told Jim last night what a wonderful woman I am," I announced grimly.

"Ah! Anything else?"

"This morning, at breakfast, Jim said

something about the new rink that opened at Belvedere this week. He threw in, casually, as it were, that An had said it might be fun to go down—and he wanted to know if I'd like to—to go along."

"H-m! I see." Nita knitted her brows, adding after a moment, "'Along.'"

"An wants to learn a few fancy stunts, it seems, and Jim has evidently promised to teach her."

"Fancy stunts," sniffed Nita. "Why, there isn't a fancy stunt in skating that An doesn't know. I suppose you're to sit meekly in the offing and enjoy yourself looking on."

"I shan't!" said I, vehemently. "If An's setting out to vamp Jim this season, I'll not play gooseberry, like Betty Kempthorne. Imagine An trotting meekly along if Archie took to philandering with the wives out here!"

The very mention of Archie in the rôle of he-vamp was too much for us, and we gave way to laughter.

Suddenly Nita stopped short in her mirth and clapped her hands.

"Selena!" she cried ecstatically. "I have it, I'm sure!"

"Have what?" I gazed at her stupidly.

"Plot, plot and counterplot," sang Nita, as, hopping out of bed, she pirouetted about the room. "I'll get Jane on the phone—or—no, you get her, Selena, while I jump into some clothes."

"But—" I began.

"Tell you about it in a minute," called Nita from the clothes closet. "It's about time that An Spaulding rode for a fall."

I was at the telephone. "Jane? Yes—Selena. I'm at Nita's. Yes. Can you come over? Now? Yes—very important. Tell you when you get here."

I hung up. "There! I just caught her on her way out."

"Good old Jane," said Nita, emerging from the clothes closet. "Lots of initiative. Give us ideas."

"Nita, stop talking in riddles."

"Well, then—" And, with sparkling eyes, Nita unfolded her plan to me.

III

An hour later, Jane and I were leaving Nita's.

"Remember this, Selena," said Jane, as we parted at the gate; "it's a short worm that has no squirming."

At eleven thirty that day I was seated

on the city bound train, all set for scene one.

I think I looked rather well in my new spring coat and a fetching hat that toned in with my eyes.

Presently I stood in an elevator of the building that was my destination, bound for the fourteenth floor.

"Reamer, Spaulding, and Reamer, 1434." There it was, across the hall.

"I'd like to see Mr. Spaulding," I murmured, trying to sound as much like a client as possible to the young woman at the information desk.

"Name, please."

I handed her my card. She moved away with it, and presently returned.

"In there." She indicated a door on the far side of the general office.

"Well! Selena!" Archie Spaulding arose from the desk chair in which he was giving dictation, and came beaming toward me, both hands outstretched. "What an unexpected pleasure! Here—sit down." He pulled out a chair.

"I'll give you the rest of that later," he told his stenographer. She departed.

Somehow, I had never before realized that Archie is—well, not exactly handsome, but nice to look at. There's an ingenuous kindness that radiates from his face, making one feel that troubles, if carried to Archie, would without doubt be in an entirely safe repository.

"Now, then," and he swung his chair around, facing mine. "What's the big deal?"

"Guess," I laughed.

"You want advice about oil stock?"

"No—but thanks for the compliment, Archie. The fact is, I ran in to ask a friendly favor of you. I want you to help me select Jim's birthday gift." Jim's birthday was three months off—but that didn't signify. "I hope I'm not imposing—but you have such excellent taste."

"Oh, really, now, Selena!" A pleased, boyish smile accompanied Archie's protest.

"I want to get Jim a new watch—something rather nice, you know. Do you think you could give me a little time at noon and go over to Starks with me?"

Archie took out his watch. "Tell you what let's do, Selena. Suppose you wait here for me, say, about twenty minutes? You can read in there." He indicated an inner room. "I'll take you to lunch with me, and then we'll go to Starks."

"Fine!" said I. And yet, although my maneuver was successful, I had a terribly spiderish sort of feeling. Archie was such a nice, unsuspecting fly!

"It's an imposition—taking up your time like this."

"Nonsense." He waved it away. "I'm sure Jim would gladly do as much for An."

"Indeed—yes," I agreed.

"Where'll we go for lunch?" said Archie presently, hat in hand.

Apparently I was seized with a sudden, brilliant inspiration. "I'll tell you what! We're within walking distance of the Blue Boar. They serve delicious sea food." The Blue Boar was An's lunching place with Larry.

"You won't say a word to any one, will you?" I cautioned on the way to the restaurant. "I want Jim to think that I selected it. You know—you just might inadvertently—" I paused.

"Not a syllable. Not even to An."

We were seating ourselves at a table for two, as I made a covert survey of the place.

"Well!" Archie exclaimed. "There's An now!"

I followed his gaze. It was An, as I had hoped; and Larry.

There was an insolent lift to An's profile as she blew a cloud of smoke ceilingward. It must have been our combined gaze that drew her attention to us, for she turned suddenly in our direction and—we were discovered!

For one fleeting instant a look of amazement twisted An's features. It was not jealousy, exactly; I should call it a look of outraged authority. It was gone in a flash—but I had seen it, and that was enough.

Another second, and An was waving brightly to us. Then, rising and throwing a word to Larry, she came gliding over to our table.

"Naughty children!" she patronized as she shook a finger at us. "What are you two doing in here together?" She was non-chalance itself—apparently.

Archie, the dear old goose, turned as red as a beet under An's mocking look.

"Selena and I—" he began, "er—are having lunch—" He paused, and the rest of the sentence fell to the floor with a crash.

"Obviously," remarked An. Then she turned to me. "Shopping, Selena?"

"Er—partly." There was just the right shade of hesitancy in my manner.

"I can call for you when you've finished," proffered An. "I have my car in."

"Thanks, awfully, An, but there are a lot of things—I can't say just when I'll be through."

An turned to Archie. "By-by, childie." And to me: "If you change your mind, Selena, you can call me at Donovan's. I have a fitting there at three." She returned to her table.

Archie's face was still flushed. "An was a bit surprised at finding us here," he ventured shyly, and though Archie is several years my senior, it made me feel like a grandmotherly siren.

"But, Archie! What about your finding An here with Larry?"

"Oh—An!" Archie smiled indulgently. "That's different. An's always been like that. She must have new people, new excitement in her life. You know—being married to me isn't—well, you wouldn't call that very exciting, would you?"

Imagine! I didn't know whether to shake him or to weep over him.

"Archie Spaulding! Do you realize that you're an attractive man? The—the type that a lot of women lose their heads over?" I am sure that the dash of coquetry I injected into my manner, as I told him this, had its effect.

"Help!" gasped Archie, almost collapsing under this broadside. Nevertheless, that guileless look of his suddenly changed and sparkled into something else. Any woman who has deliberately flattered a man of his type will know what I mean. A sort of jaunty self-consciousness, it was. And the look remained.

It was after dinner that night at home, about seven thirty, that Jim came into the living room. As he entered, I yawned prodigiously.

"Tired, Selena?"

"Dead."

"Then you won't—" Jim caught himself. "Of course you're coming down to Belvedere?"

"I don't think so. You'll have to run along without me, Jim."

"But deary—what'll you do all the long evening?"

I yearned to throw my book at the old hypocrite. Instead, I smiled sweetly. "Don't bother about me. I'll be dead to the world in an hour or so." And I yawned again.

"Well—if you won't, you won't." Jim

tried hard to keep the brightness out of his voice. "I'll go along now, and be back early. I won't be skating long, Selena. Getting too old for that sort of thing." And he smiled fatuously at his reflection in the wall mirror near by, not believing himself in the least.

The front door had closed, and Jim's car crunched around the corner of the house, when I called Jane on the phone.

"What are you doing, Jane?"

"Yawning my head off down here in the library. Ronnie's at a committee meeting. You alone, too?"

"Jim's skating to-night." My tone was significant.

"I see," said Jane, and then: "Will you kindly get off the line, madam? I know who you are. I've reported you to the chief operator." There was the click of a receiver going up, and Jane's laugh floated over the wire.

"Nosey thing," she said. "Now, then, Selena, what's the dope?"

"Everything went off as smooth as glass," I answered gleefully.

"The fates are with us," said Jane solemnly. "Now, then, the next move—"

"Is yours," I finished.

"Archie's at home, of course?"

"Of course."

"M-m-m." Jane was cogitating. "I think," she said presently, "that I have an idea. Suppose you toddle along, now, Selena, and let me concentrate. I'll call you up in the morning."

I hadn't that long to wait, however. At eleven, Jim came in very softly. I simulated drowsy awakening.

"Hullo, Sel! Been asleep long?"

"Hours," I fibbed. "Have a good time?" cheerfully.

"Oh—fair. Sorry you weren't with us. Eva and Tom Stacy and the Clementses were there. They all asked for you."

"Skate much?"

"Not a great deal," disgustedly. "A clumsy whale of a man nicked An on the ankle as he passed, and rather spoiled the evening. Put her on the bum for any fancy stunts."

Suddenly Jim's tone changed. "Say, Selena, here's something queer. I never knew that Jane Edwards and Arch Spaulding are so—so—" He floundered and paused.

"So what?" I exclaimed, sitting upright in bed. My interest wasn't simulated.

"Oh, well—I don't know what you'd call it, but it looked confoundedly queer, I'll say. And those two, of all people!"

"What looked queer?"

"Well—as we came to the fork where the road turns in at Runnymede, we saw a stalled car, and a man working on the rear tire. A woman was standing in the road beside him. I drew up alongside to see if I could help, and—by the great Jehoshaphat! If it wasn't Archie and Jane!"

"Not," added Jim hastily, "that there was anything in the mere fact itself. It was the way Jane stammered, and mixed herself up in explaining how she happened to be there; and Archie acted pretty much the same way. They behaved like two persons who have been caught at something surreptitious."

And, as he said this, Jim's manner was so righteously indignant that it was all I could do to keep my gravity.

"You're a heaven born genius," I breathed to Jane next morning, as she let me in her front door and took me into the library.

Jane grinned.

"Tell me!" I questioned, in a fever of curiosity.

"I called Archie on the phone," said Jane, "and asked him if he'd mind driving me down to Belvedere. Said I had an important wire to send. Of course he said he'd take me. His car was at the shop, but An had left hers at home. I knew that Ronnie would be back from his meeting and asleep by the time Archie and I returned. Then I went down to the kitchen and took a box of the largest, sharpest tacks I could find."

"Tacks?"

"Wait, Selena, and don't interrupt. Then I met Archie at the corner. I explained the need for secrecy. Said I'd been dabbling in Florida real estate, and wanted to wire the agent. It was a good little story. I laid it on thick about how angry Ronnie would be if ever he suspected. Dear old Arch was all sympathy and suggestions. As we came to the fork—you know, just before the bridge—where An and Jim would have to turn in coming home, I called Archie's attention to the moonlight on a barn, or something like that, and while he looked, I leaned over and threw the open box of tacks backward."

"Oh, Jane!" I gasped. "All those other cars, though!"

"Yes," said Jane serenely. "I know. It seemed a mean thing to do, but my plans were made. If one has a definite goal, Selena, one simply can't stop to think of the possible havoc it might cause. Suppose George Washington had stopped to think of the British widows and orphans the Revolution was responsible for? Where would you and I be to-day?"

There is a magnificent finality about Jane's methods that leave no argument.

"As I was saying," she continued, "we sent the wire. And as we were at Belvedere, I suggested going to a movie. So we went. And—do you know, Selena, there's something different—something—er—new and intriguing about Archie. Have you noticed it?"

Had I? Wasn't I the one who—well, let Jane take the credit!

"Would you believe it?" And Jane actually blushed a little. "Archie tried to hold my hand! Of course I was coy—but not *too* coy. But, after we started for home, I had my mind on the road. Things were due to happen at the fork."

"They did! I heard about it from Jim last night."

"Ah! If you could have only seen An," chuckled Jane. "The look in her eyes as they rested first on me and then on Archie! As though some one had hit her on the head with a sledge hammer. You know—dazed and wabbly."

IV

THE following night the weekly dance of the Runnymede Club came off. Now, there is an unwritten law in our set, as binding as the laws of the Medes and the Persians: the opening dance number is a strictly husband and wife affair.

The music had not struck up yet, when I saw Nita take Archie's arm and disappear with him in the direction of the club lawn. Nita told me afterward that it took quite a bit of maneuvering to make this move while An's back was turned. Her pretense was that she had dropped her brooch out there, and Archie was pressed into service to hunt for it.

The first notes of the opening number were sounding. As Jim and I started out on the floor, I watched An. She arose from her chair and looked about, surprise, indignation, and alarm appearing successively on her countenance. The only other person in the room who was partnerless was

Ned Osborne. He took it coolly enough, but An was obviously agitated.

Some moments later Archie strolled into the ballroom with Nita. Her hair had taken on a rather wind blown appearance. Archie, making a quick survey of the crowd, and spying Ned and An dancing together, put his arm about Nita and off they started, Nita gazing soulfully up into Archie's eyes as they danced. And Archie—mirrored that gaze!

"Selena," whispered Jim, as we glided past them, "did you see those two?"

I followed his glance and raised my brows in shocked conventionality.

"Looks as though Archie had thrown his bonnet over the windmill," I commented.

"Bonnet!" echoed Jim. "You mean the whole blooming hat works!"

V

As chairman of the club entertainment committee, it was my duty to call up An next day.

"There's a meeting Tuesday, An," I told her, in answer to her languid greeting, "and you are joint hostess with me at the next affair."

Before she could reply, there was a click on the party line, and a woman's voice—I'm sure it was Eva Stacy's—came over the wire distinctly.

"And that isn't all, my dear," the gossip ran. "They say he's been meeting her in town—cutting up all kinds of jinks—restaurants—midnight rides—you never know about these quiet men. They're the ones who go loco when they do cut loose. I was telling—" A click, and the line closed.

"An—did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" There was a sharpness in her tone that belied her question. Well, I give her credit for that bit of pretense.

"Nothing," said I. There was no need to rub it in.

The matter of the meeting was settled. "An," I asked, before ringing off, "would you care to use a ticket to the Follies this afternoon? I had expected to go, but I just found out this morning that I won't be able to make it. You'd really do me a favor."

"I'd love it. Thanks, so much, Selena. You're not ill, are you?"

"Never better. But there is a little matter that came up—" I hesitated. "A—er, something that will keep me busy in town."

That something was a trip to Archie's office. If An went to that matinée, my little game would be utterly spoiled.

My guess was correct. An even succeeded in reaching my destination before I arrived there.

"Why—An!" I faltered as I entered Archie's office. "I—I thought you had gone to the Follies."

An's look bored through me. "I knew you wouldn't mind if I gave the ticket to old Mrs. Gates. She has so little joy in life. Did you come here on business?" she asked sweetly.

"Yes," said I, with a bland smile. "But it can wait."

"Take a chair, dear." And as she pushed one toward me, Archie came in.

He took my proffered hand and gave it a little extra, lingering squeeze. There was something in his manner, however, that was not altogether cheerful.

"Selena," said Archie, "did An tell you the news?"

"No."

I looked from one to the other.

Archie made his little speech.

"I'm—I'm going on a trip."

"We are going," corrected An, and added, beaming: "To Alaska."

"Alaska!"

I really was taken off my feet for a moment.

"Yes." And An went over and put her hand caressingly on Archie's shoulder. It was the first time, by the way, that I ever saw her indulge in a public display of affection—toward Archie. "You see, Archie and I have always been wild to see Alaska, haven't we, dear?"

Archie nodded mechanically.

"And now that Gerald is big enough for us to leave him, we're going to have a second honeymoon. I was saving it for Archie as a surprise, and—we've just decided to-day!"

"Yes," said Archie, "just to-day."

Well, of course Archie may have been wild to see Alaska, but he had managed to keep his longing beautifully concealed from the rest of us.

VI

I WAITED until after dinner that night to tell Jim.

We were in the living room, before a glorious log fire, the evening having grown unseasonably chilly.

Presently the psychological moment presented itself.

"By the way," I remarked casually, "An and Archie are leaving next week for Alaska."

I watched Jim, expecting to see astonishment, pique, jealousy—Heaven knows what—in his face—as I broke the news.

"Well," said Jim, in mild surprise, "that's rather sudden, isn't it?"

He was interested, but not exactly poignantly so.

"You—you won't be able to teach An those new golf strokes next week, as you promised her."

"No," said Jim, comfortably, "I s'pose not." He took a few more draws from his pipe. I went over and sat on the arm of his chair and began rumpling up his hair, while he casually put his unoccupied arm around me.

"Do you know, Selena, it's funny, but An's not the same An any more; she's changed," said Jim, with conviction. "She's got a queer new streak where Arch is concerned. If it was any other woman but An, I'd say she is plain, old-fashioned, jealous. Why, a person can't go out with her but that she stops off at odd places to call Archie up at his office, or the house, or the garage, and she gets in a perfect stew if she can't locate him." Jim chuckled.

"What do you make of it, Se?"

"I think," said I, gazing into the heart of the fire, "that An's trained the spot light on home talent."

RUNNERS

MORTALS, however fleetly you may trip

'Long life's varied pathways in your prime,

One still remains whom you may not outstrip—

That tireless runner—Time!

Archibald Crombie

The Arch Diplomat

THIS EARNEST YOUTH WAS DETERMINED THAT HIS IDOL'S
FEET MUST NOT BE OF CLAY

By Richard Field Maynard

PEMBERTON SIMS, at present a bank clerk, was reading a five-foot bookshelf and studying foreign languages, with the intention of entering politics and becoming a diplomat, and eventually ambassador to the Court of St. James. He naturally wished to share his destiny with a girl capable of understanding his large view of life and assisting him in his career.

Love, he considered, was appropriately the first requisite, but his head must approve the choice of his heart if it could not actually dictate it. He, at least, would approach with intelligence a question in which many men, even some great ones, had shown an inexplicable lapse of good sense.

Several girls had attracted young Mr. Sims's interest temporarily, but when he talked with them at all seriously, he was appalled by the pettiness of their minds. Occasionally he would invite some lovely creature to ride in his flivver runabout, and, returning by moonlight—when, if ever, one should feel the thrill and throb of world events—he would tentatively broach the subject of the income tax, the world court, or the further scrapping of the navy, without awakening the response he was looking for. Perhaps Pemberton's ideals were too high. At all events, every girl so far had failed to measure up to them.

Then, like a flaming meteor, a possibility arrived from out of town. She had a name of some distinction—Ermingarde Terry. She dressed and carried herself superbly. She wasn't tall.

In fact, if one lacked spiritual vision, she was even shorter than little Betty Lane, a local product. But that was no measure at all of the effect Miss Terry gave. By the tilt of her head and the slant of her eyes,

she had the air of looking down even on much taller people. Pem was pleased to think how admiringly she would grace his table when they should entertain the French ambassador or the Duke of York.

He had intended to invite her to ride in his car on Saturday afternoon, but the bank examiner had dropped in unexpectedly and kept him too busy to do his usual reading of current events. Rather than display to her his ignorance of what was going on in the outside world, he decided to wait another day.

Meanwhile, he could try out on Betty some new theories he had developed concerning the relations between cause and effect in European politics. If they sounded well on her, they might make a real hit with the new girl.

He phoned Betty, and, at the usual hour, drove over and collected her.

There was one good thing about Betty; he didn't have to pretend anything with her. He knew that she knew the genuine altitude of his ideals. He felt free to confess now that he hadn't even read the *Weekly Analysis*.

Her face brightened. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll burn the midnight oil," he replied.

"You'll get sick if you lose your sleep."

"But there are emergencies which—"

"Oh, wouldn't you like me to—I mean, wouldn't it save you time if I should repeat to you what's in the *Highview* and *Gist of Events*? You know, I have a sticky memory, even if I don't always understand what sticks."

"Fine! But I didn't know you read those magazines. Go ahead," he smiled indulgently, "and tell me everything you can remember."

"Goody!" she exclaimed with childish

delight. "There was a new tangle in the Balkans—" and she reeled off what sounded like verbatim passages from the two magazines mentioned, and the morning newspaper, besides.

The continuous flow of her parrotlike memory seemed quite undisturbed by any genuine understanding, yet curiously he discovered that he was getting some very clear impressions—clearer, in fact, than he usually got from her sources of information. This struck him as extremely odd, until he reflected that it would be the inevitable result of her forgetting the uninteresting and cluttering details that confuse much of our current literature.

It seemed strange for her to be doing all the talking. Suddenly he awoke to the fact that she had stopped, and was looking up to him as if hoping for some word of approval. He gave it—indeed, several—as many as the restricting limits of the truth permitted. She appeared grateful, and he felt pleasantly magnanimous in so easily making her happy.

Incidentally he noticed that a consequent slight flush was rather becoming to her, although, of course, she never could have the brilliant color that made Ermingarde Terry so striking, even at a distance. As a sort of substitute, Betty Lane was extraordinarily neat. Always she gave the impression of recent, in fact very recent, association with soap and water. But her hair was plain and straight, and lacked the least sign of those fascinating wispy curls that contributed to the charm—and peril—of the new girl.

Not until he was leaving Betty at her house did he confide the delectable news that he had been promoted to the position of assistant cashier at the bank. She was delighted, as he had known she would be. It was distinctly agreeable to tell of his good fortune to one who wasn't secretly envious, as some of the clerks probably were, or openly sarcastic, like Mr. Kelly, the cashier, who, it was rumored, had tried to influence the directors to advance another man instead.

"They ought to make *you* cashier," declared Betty, with her extravagant loyalty and ignorance of precedence. "Wouldn't they be surprised, the old stick-in-the-muds, if they knew they had a future ambassador giving their little toy bank the benefit of his time and intelligence!"

As he drove off he realized that he was

feeling rather pleasant. He wished he might feel that way oftener. If he could only find out what caused it! Perhaps it was just getting out into the country, and yet—

II

He stopped for an evening paper, and glanced over the headlines. His eye lit on an insignificant paragraph in a lower corner: *Girls' Feet*. Funny how anything about girls seemed to catch his attention lately. It read:

A former president of the National Association of Chiropodists advises young men contemplating matrimony to insist on seeing the young ladies' bare feet. If the pedal extremities are deformed from wearing too small or narrow shoes, or from any other reason, he advises the prospective bridegroom to take warning, for the woman with bad feet is a very unsatisfactory helpmeet—inefficient, unsympathetic, and exacting.

Well, that was a new one! He had never thought of any such difficulty. Those fancy shoes of Betty's! Were they meant to hide something? But he couldn't worry about all the girls in the world. It was Ermingarde's feet he was interested in. Matrimony was more complicated than he had supposed.

But how could he get to see Ermingarde's feet? It ought to be a matter of social form that no one would question. He should be able to say:

"Miss Terry—Ermingarde—I love you, and am about to—to have an interview with your father. But first, let me see your bare feet."

How perfectly tactless that would sound! But this is only because people aren't used to it.

If only Ermingarde should conveniently turn her ankle—just a little in a good cause—he might bind it up for her. He must remember to get a bandage at the drug store. And that would put him in a good light, too, as having the forethought to provide for her every want.

But what if she didn't turn her ankle? He couldn't propose that they go wading like children over the pebbly stones of some mosquito infested brook. Besides, he himself had a callous place on one toe from that last pair of pointed shoes he had bought because they were a bargain.

If only Ermingarde might want some cat-tails from the edge of a swamp and get her feet wet, he could build a fire—he must remember to have a box of matches handy

—and she would take off her shoes and stockings in order to dry them. The only trouble was that there weren't any cat-tails at this time of year. If he couldn't think of a plausible plan, he'd have to trust to luck and the inspiration of the moment.

As early as he dared, he phoned Miss Terry, inviting her to ride in his car, which, fortunately, had not long since been painted over as good as new; but she explained that she had an engagement. She didn't say what it was, but let it go at that—a trifle gushing, and rather more formal than he had anticipated.

Altogether, it wasn't particularly satisfactory, considering what he was contemplating toward her, the greatest compliment, in fact, that a man can offer a woman. But, of course, she couldn't have known that, and consequently he would be an eligible bachelor for one more day at least.

It was curious that he hadn't even noticed Ermingarde's shoes when his eyes had lit on Betty's new, tight looking, high heeled, tan suede ones half a block off the very first time she wore them. Too bad, a nice girl like that! Somebody ought to show Betty that article about girls' feet.

But why not use Betty for a dress rehearsal? Why not see what she would do if she should get *her* feet wet? Perhaps she would toast her toes before the fire with her wet shoes and stockings on, attempting to dry them that way. It would be just like her, with that elfin shyness of hers. Oh, well, something might happen—something unforeseen—only nothing like that ever did happen in civilized life.

He went to the phone. "Hello, Betty, this is Pemberton. Fine day for a ride. Call for you about three."

"But, Pem, I'm awfully sorry. Bobby Hatfield is coming for tea this afternoon, and I promised him—"

"Oh, you can cut it somehow. Phone him to come this evening, instead."

"But I haven't seen him since he got back!"

"Well, but that was only last night, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but—"

"No use letting him spoil a perfectly good day like this! What's the matter, anyhow? You never had an engagement before when I asked you to go any place."

"Didn't I, really? Well, anyhow, Bob-
by Hatfield—"

"What's he got to do with it? You just call him up and—"

"Why, Pemberton, you mayn't tell me what I must do!"

"But, Betty, I'm going to take you for a nice ride, and—"

"But I haven't accepted! I'm not a child to be told what you're going to do with me! I have to be invited politely. Good-by!"

"But, Betty, it's a shame to spoil a—
Betty! Hello, Betty!"

He jammed the receiver on the hook and strode to the window. What had struck her, anyway? Up on her ear in a flash, and for no reason at all! Must have been eating too much candy and got a grouch on. Bet that Bob Hatfield sent it to her.

When Pemberton should be ambassador to Great Britain, what would Bob Hatfield be? Probably the same as he was right now, traveling for Hodges & Smith. Humph!

But she had had candy before without behaving like this. Must be something else. Maybe her feet hurt her. If that was it, then, just because his invitation didn't happen to be quite according to form— But it should have been according to form. A diplomat should be the soul of etiquette to all people at all times.

He went back to the phone. "Hello, Betty! Say, I want to resume diplomatic relations awfully much! I want to invite you the politest way possible, if you'll only just tell me how you'd like it best."

"Goody! I knew you would. I knew it so much, I've phoned Bobby already. I promised to make some chocolate fudge if he'd come to-night instead. So it 'll be all right about this afternoon. I mean, I shall be happy to accept your very kind invitation. And I didn't tell you, but it's my birthday. I'm eighteen. I'm not going to be 'Betty' any more. I'm 'Elizabeth' now."

Well, what do you know about that? Grown up and everything! But the unexpected must be met with calm emotions—if any—and a clear head. In fact, the unexpected is probably the supreme test of the diplomat.

III

For the first time she kept him waiting. "So sorry," she apologized laughingly, "but I was trying on my new dress, a present from mother."

It was daffodil yellow, trimmed with silvery green. The accordion-pleated skirt swayed mysteriously, and came to rest in slim lines. Her face dimpled under a sort of poke bonnet affair of green with a touch of yellow. He only recognized the shoes he disapproved of.

"Do you like it?"

"Fine! Looks fine!" The monosyllables seemed to fall short of the occasion. If the Queen at Buckingham should turn around that way to show him her new gown before the reception to the foreign ambassadors, he would have to think of something more poetic, more like Shakespeare, who could so easily present a nosegay of pretty words to please a lady. With an effort, he added: "Makes you look sort of—of graceful!"

She glanced up with violet-blue eyes, shifting across his face like one who is reading. "I'm glad," she said finally. "I'm glad you said 'graceful,' because that's the only thing I can ever hope to be." She swirled around and went skipping, almost dancing, out to the car.

Ordinarily he would have favored her with a dozen miles or so of informal oratory just to start things, but to-day he decided to be more direct. "Say, Bet—Elizabeth, don't those shoes hurt you?"

"No. Why?"

"Nothing, only I was thinking that if they did, for a long ride, nobody would see in the bottom of the car if you should slip them off."

"Oh, they're all right," she replied unhesitatingly. "Ermingarde Terry gave them to me. Stylish, aren't they? It's the high cutaway heels that make them look shorter than they really are. She couldn't wear them. Doctor wouldn't let her."

"But, if she oughtn't to, oughtn't you not to, too?"

"Oughtn't I what?"

"I mean, wouldn't they be just as bad for you?"

"But, Pemberton, they were terribly expensive, and it seems extravagant not to get some good out of them."

"It's more extravagant to ruin your feet!"

"Oh, you're right. I might as well admit it first as last." That was another good point about Betty. "I suppose there's nothing to do but throw them out to-morrow."

"But don't you think you ought to take

them off now? If they're too short for to-morrow, they must be too short for to-day." That was the sort of logic he liked—no dodging it.

"Why, Pem, I can't take them off now!"

"But if it's sensible—"

"I can't, Pem, that's all, I can't."

"Can't! Easy enough. Only one button. Let me do it for you."

"Oh, you don't understand!" she cried, tucking her feet under her dress. "Mother doesn't like me to sew on Sunday, and—there's a hole in my stocking!"

He thought that over for a hundred yards. "If it's in the heel, it wouldn't show."

"But it's in the toe."

He thought that over. "Which one? You could take off the other."

"But there's one in both!"

That looked like a checkmate, but fortunately she elaborated it. "You might suppose that I should have mended them yesterday, but I didn't have them then, not till I walked to church this morning. Very likely it does prove that Ermingarde's shoes are the least little bit too short for me—but I don't see how you knew it."

"I didn't exactly know it," he confessed, "but it makes a girl difficult to get along with if her shoes don't fit."

"That's just what the dancing teacher says," confirmed Betty. "She teaches only æsthetic dancing, you know, and that's barefoot."

"Does she let people come and watch?"

"Any lady. No man."

Another checkmate. But Betty continued with a remark so pat that he would have thought it, from any one else, almost more than a coincidence. "You see, I've been in the class from the beginning, and now Miss Brooks lets me help her with the new girls. Some of them have really beautiful feet. If anybody wanted to know about the feet of any girl in our crowd, I could tell them."

If he only dared to ask about Ermingarde's feet!

"There's Ermingarde, for instance," she went on, while his heart came up in his throat. "She has such cunning little feet, but, poor dear, the weakest fallen arches! I'm giving her the corrective exercises she must have before she can go very far with her dancing."

"But—but can she ever get cured?"

"I hope so, eventually. Anyhow, I'm

doing everything I can for her. You've taught me so much about things I'd never have known that I thought maybe it would please you if I, in turn, could help somebody else—especially Ermingarde."

That looked distinctly pointed. Could she have guessed anything by sheer intuition? Yet it was just like her to do exactly the right thing without a thought of herself.

"But you mustn't give me any credit for that," she explained, as though following his thought. "We really made a trade. She gave me her best shoes and—"

"But I don't see why you took them. You might get fallen arches like hers."

Betty lowered her eyes humbly. "Pemberton, I've never had anything fancy in all my life, and I did want something just once. Mother says any girl can doll up with fussy stuff, but it's a real art to look nice with plain things. She wanted me to learn with them first. But I was going to tell you, it wasn't only the shoes that Ermingarde gave me. She showed me how to fix my hair exactly the way she does. Look!"

Betty lifted off her hat, and her hair fluffed out of it, all wispy curls. Pem felt queer, almost as if Betty had vanished and Ermingarde had slipped into her place.

IV

"Poor Ermingarde!" continued Betty's voice. "I'm so sorry for her! She has a red-headed stepmother, and she says it's h-e-double-l at home. Nobody could blame her for wanting to get married, so she can break away. She's an awfully fine girl underneath—I don't care what the other girls say—but she's got to get a husband, and she's trying first for a good one before coming down to a compromise. Naturally she's doing everything, absolutely everything, to make herself attractive. And she's a little artist at it, believe me!"

Betty tilted her chin, and slanted her half closed eyes at Pemberton—and laughed! It was the affected and rather loud laugh of Ermingarde. Then Betty blushed violently, and returned to her natural self once more.

"Anybody can do *that*," she explained, "if they're desperate enough. But I'm not that type. And I like my mother, and I don't have to get married, *ever*, if I don't want to."

This sounded too independent. But it

was a dangerous subject. He'd better steer off on something else. "Say, Betty, why did you say you could never hope to be anything more than just 'graceful'?"

"Because I never have been."

"Pooh! That's no reason at all. Suppose I should say I never could be ambassador because I never have been? You see how ridiculous that would sound! Why, when you get yourself fixed up the way Ermin—the way other girls do, you'd look fine anywhere, I don't care where it is—here or abroad or— You'd make a fine *Cinderella* at a diplomatic ball—I guess."

"Oh, Pem! But why do you say, 'I guess'?"

"Because— Well, there was something about *Cinderella's* feet, wasn't there? And I couldn't tell for sure when I've never seen your feet, could I?"

Her lips parted in protest. "But that's insisting on rather a literal interpretation, don't you think? Must I take off my shoes and humbly approach you barefoot before I can get a compliment without a string tied to it?"

"I wish I *could* see you dance, Elizabeth—barefoot."

She pouted, and replied with unexpected seriousness. "I'd love to dance for you, Pem, because—because you never could understand me, quite, till then. But—it doesn't matter if you never should—I mean, understand, because— Well, it doesn't matter." There was a curious little throb in her voice. "Besides, we mustn't carry this dress rehearsal too far."

"'Dress rehearsal!' Why, Betty—"

"Oh, I know. The other girls tell me what you tell them, and it's always what you've told me before, only a little more perfected by then. You know, now, how to see Ermingarde's feet, so you don't need to see *me* dance."

"But I read an article—"

"Oh, I read last evening's paper, too. Didn't you even notice how I was helping you? Didn't you see that I was giving you leads and opportunities? Didn't I almost rehearse you for proposing to Ermingarde? There isn't anything more you could ask of a friend—of a girl friend. Pem, take me right back home. I think I'm getting a headache!"

He felt the rush of her almost incoherent words without having time to realize their meaning, but he suspected, somehow, that she had precipitated a diplomatic crisis in—

volving Ermingarde. He fended with a question. "But what could have made you imagine for a moment I was the least interested in Ermingarde?"

"She did—though I knew it, anyway. She said you were debating whether or not to fall in love with her, and were getting ready to decide that you would."

"She told you that! But she hadn't any right— Why, I've hardly even been decent to her, let alone chasing after her the way the other fellows do!"

"That's just it. You stood off, and she said every time she looked out the corner of an eye, she could see you watching her every move, and studying it, and criticizing it, and that made her so nervous that the day of the picnic she swallowed an olive whole! She says you're top-heavy with learning, though it may make you famous some day, if you don't capsize before then. She says she respects your 'appalling ambition and the perfect sincerity of your preposterous ideals,' but she wouldn't marry you for the Bank of England and all the crown jewels! But, of course, Pem, any girl might say that before you asked her."

The final implication threw Ermingarde's whole expressed opinion into discredit. It might even mean that she was secretly in love with him, and was only expressing her pique that he had continued to hold aloof. That would be just like a girl. In fact, he felt that he was getting a pretty good line on feminine psychology. At the same time, Ermingarde seemed rather reduced from her position of a divine goddess.

"She has fallen arches," he said, to sum up the case.

"I will mend them for you."

"But that isn't the only thing the matter with Ermingarde, I've noticed. She lacks the imperturbable poise to move in diplomatic circles. If she swallowed an olive at a picnic, what would she swallow at Windsor Castle? A doughnut, maybe."

"Oh, Pem! They don't have doughnuts at Windsor!"

"Don't they? I should think the queen could have *anything*! But how am I to know things like that? Sometimes I'd feel actually embarrassed if I didn't remember that a diplomat must *never* be embarrassed. I've noticed that the other fellows take a lot of things for granted that I never even heard of. I guess it's not having had any mother since I can remember that's mostly the matter with me. Sometimes I'd like to

ask little foolish questions that I suppose maybe a mother wouldn't laugh at. Betty, would *you* tell me something?"

"That's what friends are for, isn't it, Pem?"

"Guess you're the only real friend I have, that is, as real as this."

"You might have any number of friends if you weren't so shy."

V

SHY! How could she know *that*? He thought he had conquered, to every outward appearance at least, the fault he had been fighting all his life.

"That's sort of what I wanted to ask you," he said. "I've tried every kind of advertised scheme to cultivate assurance. I've tried to believe the best of myself—and expect it. I've even tried to trick myself into *thinking* assurance. But I was wondering if I hadn't overdone it a bit. It's a difficult balance. I have to seem able to do what I'm intrusted with, yet I mustn't appear conceited. I couldn't get anywhere if people thought I was that. Besides, I shouldn't want to be it, anyhow."

"Why, Pemberton, nobody could ever think you're conceited when they can see as plain as day how desperately hard you're trying to keep a stiff upper lip for all you've planned. I guess it's a good deal like dancing. Nobody expects you to be perfectly graceful the first time you try it. I've even heard some good-natured jokes about the way you're rehearsing in Tompkinsville for the part you're to play at St. James. But people are getting interested. They're going to help you. They're beginning to, already. Aren't you being pushed ahead at the bank, and being given more and more responsibility? That ought to give you *real* assurance, Pemberton Sims."

"It does help, Betty. And I need it. It isn't so easy to study international law alone, without a teacher, or to think in billions about the treasury systems of different countries, or to connect history with current events, or to train the speaking voice to be persuasive to millions by radio, or to keep in the pink of physical condition with calisthenics night and morning, or to learn enough of science and industry and the common affairs of men to meet them easily, each concerning his own especial interest"—he felt like orating, now—"or to tell from the ruffled cross currents of party politics the deeper flow of affairs of State,

all these things, and many more, in my spare time only. Why, it's a mouthful to say it. I wonder, I really wonder, what makes you think I can *do* it!"

For answer, she only looked up at him, smiling, with a faith not to be denied shining in her eyes.

"By Jove, Betty, if you can only keep on *believing*, just to do the work wouldn't be so hard!"

"Oh, won't I be proud," she exclaimed impulsively, "when I read in the *Tompkinsville* paper how 'Pemberton Sims, ambassador from the United States, was entertained by the—'"

"No, no, Betty, I want to be with you when you read that! It wouldn't be any fun if I couldn't see you being glad. But if I was being entertained in London, I'd have to be there, hang it all! No, you mustn't read about it in *Tompkinsville*. You come over and read it in the *London Times*!"

"Maybe mother wouldn't let me."

"She would, the way I mean." He slowed down the car. "Elizabeth, I want to ask you something; about the most important thing a man can ask. Will you—" His voice stuck in his dry throat.

She drew back into the farthest corner of her seat. "Will I what? We never talk of anything but world affairs. How could I know which is the most important?"

"Yes, you do, Elizabeth! Will you—" Again his voice balked.

"You mentioned needing a mother, Pemberton, but I'm not old enough to be one to you. Maybe you'd like me to be a sister, to tell you things, if that would do."

"It wouldn't do at all. I mean I want you to—"

"Well, Pem? Whatever it is, it seems to be something embarrassing. Perhaps you're trying to think of a delicate way of asking to see me *dance—barefoot.*"

"Oh, yes! I mean, *no!* Not yet! I don't want to take any chances! I want everything settled first! I suppose your arches are perfect; but whether they are or not, it's you, Elizabeth, just you, for better, for worse—"

And somehow, after that, he understood other great men better.

"Oh, what's that?" cried Betty, pointing up the road.

"Looks like a wreck."

It was a small touring car that had evidently tried to post itself in an R. F. D.

letter box. A man stepped out to the middle of the road and raised his hand. It seemed like the hand of an evil fate, for it belonged to Mr. Kelly, the cashier. Always he had been crossing Pemberton's path in one way or another, but now he blocked it literally.

He grinned in his usual mirthless way. "Well, if that isn't Sims! Think of meeting just the right man on a lonely road like this! I'm looking for somebody to swap cars with. A hundred dollars to boot. How's that? Nothing the matter but one wheel. Don't know any one more willing to do a favor than Pemberton Sims, the politest man in the bank!"

A compliment from Mr. Kelly was virtually unknown.

"I'm very sorry," replied Pem, cautiously, "but you see—"

"Oh, I'm sure the young lady would be obliging and wait a few minutes. Of course I'll send a wrecking car from the nearest garage. Another hundred to buy her a present. Come, now."

He wasn't usually so easy with his money.

"Under any other circumstances—" began Pem.

"Unfortunately I'm not interested in other circumstances." Mr. Kelly's voice betrayed irritability. "Everything has *some* price. What's yours for your car?"

Pem felt himself getting hot, but he also knew that Betty would expect him to keep diplomatically cool. "I'm very sorry, but—"

"You said that before! Now I can't stand here haggling! I always suspected you were a deep one, Sims. Maybe you figure you can get more by not seeming too anxious. But every man has his price. I ought to know. What's yours?"

"You *ought* to know—but you don't, if you think you can buy me! You'd better stand out of the way, Mr. Kelly, if you don't want to get run over." Pem was a little touchy on the subject of price. Conscious of Betty's presence, however, he added more suavely: "Some other time, perhaps—but, to-day, my car is not for sale."

"Then I'll have to *take* it!"

VI

PEM looked into the business end of an automatic. He decided that the books of etiquette would probably advise holding up one's hands. He did.

"Now both of you get out."

"How can I open the door with my hands up?"

"Your girl can do it for you."

Betty reached over to turn the handle, then slipped out on her side.

"I'm keeping you covered, Sims, and don't you forget it. You lift out those two suit cases from my car and put them in the back of yours. Yes, they're heavy. Take one at a time. There, that's the idea. Now, I'm off. Keep your hands up till I'm out of sight. By-by, and give my regards to that bank examiner."

He had raised one foot to the running board when a brown streak whizzed past his head from Betty's side of the car, then another hit him between the eyes. His arms flew up to guard his face, and this posture was Mr. Kelly's undoing.

Pem made a dive at his throat and felt him crumple backward. The automatic flopped half across the road. Without it, Mr. Kelly's personality seemed lacking in much of its former impressiveness.

"Betty," called Pem, "you tie his hands while I keep him pinned down."

He was too busy with the struggling Mr. Kelly to see how she managed, but presently she said, somewhat breathlessly: "All right. He's finished. He'll keep until the officers come for him, I'll bet. But you'd better take his gun." Gingerly she picked it up and handed it to Pem.

Watching Mr. Kelly's glaring counte-

nance, Pem slid into his seat beside Betty, and opened up the throttle.

At the moment of apparent victory, he suddenly feared he had failed in the larger issue. "Oh, Betty, no true diplomat would get into a fight. The essence of diplomacy is attainment without violence. I'll never get to St. James this way."

"But, Pem, it wasn't you, but Mr. Kelly who failed in diplomacy. That was why he pulled his gun. Even then you didn't exactly fight. You disarmed him—and disarmament makes diplomacy supreme. Tomorrow your picture will be on the front page of our paper. St. James isn't so far, now. And, Pem, with those suit cases bulging with money, hadn't we better phone for a motor cycle policeman to come out and meet us? We might as well ride home in style."

"We'd look like a parade!"

"Yes, but you might as well rehearse that, too, because, when you're famous—"

Modestly he lowered his eyes, and gazed, bewildered, at the gleaming, beautiful curves. "Betty! Betty! *Where* are your shoes—and stockings?"

"One shoe missed, and it's probably back in the bushes," she explained. "The other hit him on the nose. I didn't stop to pick them up, because I was going to throw them away anyhow. And when you told me to tie his hands, there wasn't a thing in sight to tie them with except my stockings!"

NIGHT AT SEA

LAST night I could not sleep—the whole night long
I listened to the sea's impassioned song
Outside my cabin window. In the room
Filled with the cold, sweet sea wind's faint perfume,
The thought of you was like a low refrain
To the sea's song—one soft, incessant strain
Of melody. Night-long I could not sleep
For thoughts of you. Toward dawn I softly creep
To the deserted deck. How dark and still
The sea lies now! But in a little while
The east will blossom like a damask rose,
And paint the somber water till it glows
Where jeweled waves break into silver lace;
Then day will dawn—and I shall see your face!

Lena Whittaker Blakeney

White Magic

THE GOLDEN LURE OF THE FROZEN NORTHLAND TESTS ONE
MAN'S BODY AND ANOTHER'S SOUL

By Don Cameron Shafer

"**W**HAT are you up to now, Bully?" At the sound of this unexpected voice, weak and rattling though it was, the heavy man, kneeling upon the cabin floor, sprang to his feet in sudden alarm and confusion, as one caught in disloyalty and secret guilt.

"Why—why—" Turnbull stammered hoarsely, groping in his slow mind for a plausible explanation. "I wasn't doin' nothin'!"

"Oh, I thought you were packing up the bags."

"I was jest lookin' over our things a bit," he muttered, with ill-assumed carelessness, as he interposed the bulk of his thick body between the searching eyes of his helpless comrade and the visible evidence of his treachery. "I jest wanted t' see how we're fixed for a long stay here, now that you're all crippled up and in sich a bad way."

The shadowy interior of this prospector's small log cabin, with only oiled muslin for the windows, helped to mask the littered floor whereon were scattered the things he had been packing so carefully in a copious canvas sledge bag.

"You've been ravin' an' ramblin' for hours an' hours," he explained, much faster than words usually dropped from his bearded lips. "I guess you ain't quite all there yet, from th' way you talk!"

The accusative voice of his comrade now became a direct challenge.

"You wouldn't leave me here to die, would you, Bully?"

"Why, Mac, you know I wouldn't think o' sich a wicked thing!" He attempted, in a loud voice, to shout down truth, accompanied with chuckling laughter meant to emphasize the absurdity of such a thought. "Ain't we been pals almost a year, now, up here in this Northern wilderness? An'

jest 'cause you got your feet frosted pretty bad, you needn't think I'm goin' t' run away an' leave you. Why, you'd die in most no time a-tall, Mac, if I should go—"

"That's just the point, Bully!" still unconvinced. "You'll have to stand by, and nurse me along until I can move these feet once more."

"Don't you worry, now—"

Across one end of this little log cabin a low platform of poles extended from wall to wall, some eighteen inches from the hewn puncheon floor. This was covered with a deep mat of spruce boughs, forming a primitive bed upon which, wrapped in a blanket, lay the gaunt and tortured form of Alan MacLeod, frontiersman and prospector, his thin face drawn and muscle-knotted with the steady beat of pain in his frosted feet.

Pain throbbed in that swollen flesh, in frost burst toes, beat upon sensitive nerves until the brain, for hours past, had succumbed to nature's welcome anæsthetic of grateful unconsciousness. But now he was fully awake and very much alert—fear over the master of pain, and the mind first in the defense of the body.

Even had Alan not known the primitive instincts that ruled the huge bulk of his sole companion in the wilds; had he not understood fully the man's inherent greed for things of value, there before him on the shadow ridden floor was the indisputable evidence, not to be lied away, that within an hour more, had he not awakened, he would have been abandoned and left alone to adverse fate. And to be left alone now, when he was almost as helpless as an infant, in the winter of an Arctic wilderness, was nothing but death itself, a prolonged and insufferable death of cold, and pain, and slow starvation.

"You've been clean out o' your head for 'most two days," said Bully, trying to be genial as well as cunning; "an' if you was all right now, you wouldn't be 'cusin' me o' packin' up t' leave you."

The bullying tone of the man's heavy voice, stringing lying words upon the slender thread of truth, were a direct confession of his guilty intent.

"You're goin' t' lose them feet!" said he, brutally.

"No, I won't," returned MacLeod. "I may shed a few toes, but I can spare 'em. When the swelling goes down the pain will let up a bit. Then I will be able to sit up and help myself a little. In a week or two I will be up and around, just as good as ever."

"I don't believe you will ever walk agin."

"You wait and see!"

Bully's thick lips moved to voice his determination not to wait another day, but he thought best to humor his companion, confident that the man would soon drop back into delirium again.

"O' course I aim t' see you through, Mac."

"I think you will." MacLeod's voice carried a subdued note of authority. "We didn't plan to go out until this snow settles. A few weeks more won't make any difference."

"We ain't got any too much grub."

"There's enough. With the rifle and the net, we'll get along."

"All right, all right. Don't make yourself any worse by worryin'. Go right back t' sleep an' take things easy," the oily words continued. "Ol' Bully's right here t' look after you."

A thickset, black-bearded man, nodding and swaying like a standing bear, his attitude half threatening, half conciliatory, weighing the situation in his slow mind, he watched his stricken companion through narrowed eyes, almost bold enough to declare his purpose; but cunning bade him bide his time. It was unfortunate that Alan had awakened just as he did, but he soon would be dead to the world again.

"Don't you fret yourself any 'bout me," said he. "I'll look after things an' take keer o' you, Mac, until your feet 'll hold you once more. Jest as soon 's you can set on th' sledge, I'll haul you out with your share o' th' gold."

This mention of their treasure, as Alan

feared, betrayed the source of evil within his brain. The wide eyes of the suffering man looked beyond the threatening, swaying figure to the rough hewn cabin table whereon he noted, in alarm and consternation, the ten buckskin sacks containing their season's clean-up of gold dust—all ready for the gaping duffel bag on the floor.

II

FOR a little while Bully continued to talk loudly, with artificial enthusiasm for his subject, and too much chuckling stage laughter. He labored under the impression that, besides declaring and emphasizing his devotion to a comrade in distress, he was diverting attention from his clumsy efforts to replace, unobserved, the things he had been packing up—to await a more propitious hour.

He knew that Alan would be in the throes of fever and delirium again by night-fall; then he could finish packing without interruption, and make an early start in the morning before he awakened. He justified this infamous act, and salved his conscience by arguing that the man would die anyway, and that it was necessary for him to start back to the settlements at once to save his own life.

"We've been mighty lucky this summer," said he, kicking the partially filled duffel bag under the table, out of sight, "an' you can afford t' lose a few toes for five thousand dollars."

"I'd give every ounce of it to have the use of my feet again," said MacLeod, well knowing the danger that threatened.

"Take it easy, Mac. I'll have you up on your pins agin in a few days. You'll be back in Dawson 'fore you know it, gettin' the good o' your money."

"There is just as much evil in gold, Bully, as there is good!"

"You're kinda flighty yet," said the heavy man, not understanding; "but you'll be all right by to-morrow."

Alan MacLeod, alive and well, had been the leading and dominating force in this wilderness enterprise. Turnbull never dreamed of questioning his word or disobeying his commands. Truth to tell, he stood a bit in awe of "Mac," always conscious of his own mental incompetence before a superior intellect; cowering a bit, despite his bulk, in the face of greater courage and a more dominant will.

But, now that Alan was stricken down

like a great tree, and like a tree must lay where he fell, crippled and helpless, absolutely dependent, Turnbull's courage mounted to the ascendancy. MacLeod, supine and weakened by pain, his mind rambling, was no longer to be feared. Ten pokes of gold instead of five! The malignant devils of the yellow metal whispered their evil in his ears.

"I'll go down t' th' lake an' pull th' trap net," he muttered, anxious to escape Alan's questioning eyes. "Maybe there's a fat trout in it for your dinner."

"I'm not hungry," said Alan quietly, not a little frightened by the discovery that his life was threatened; "but I would like a drink."

Bully brought him a cup of water, keeping up the flow of artificial good humor and genial comradeship.

"Genuine Adam's ale," chuckled he. "You watch out it don't go t' your head an' give you some more foolish ideas."

"Sorry you've got to wait on me this way," said Alan, his fingers trembling a bit as he handed back the tin cup, though he was no coward, even in the face of death. "My feet are like big chunks of hot lead."

"Glad t' do it for you, Mac."

"It won't be but a few days, Bully."

"No, course not—jest a little while!"

Though Alan read his comrade's simple mind like a printed page, and sensed the threat in this last remark, still he resolved upon one simple test to make sure that he was right.

"I don't mind being here, crippled and helpless, but I wish I had something to do—it would keep my mind off the pain."

"You jest take another snooze," said Bully. "There ain't nothin' you can do."

"I could clean the rifle," said Alan.

"Oh—bah!" The grin faded instantly from Bully's heavy face, and he stared hard at Alan, sure of his intent. "I—I—I jest cleaned up th' ol' fusee myself!"

Hastily he slipped on his heavy coat and went outdoors.

"Like t' get his hands on th' gun, eh?" he said to himself as he went down the well-beaten pathway through the snow to the ice-covered lake. "Thinkin' he could hold me here with a gun, eh?"

Muttering away to himself, certain that he knew what Alan wanted with the rifle, and telling himself he wasn't such a fool as to place a weapon in Alan's hands, he didn't take the rifle along with him, because he

was confident that Alan could not get up to get it, and even if he could, the gun wouldn't do him any good. Bully could well afford to laugh at threats, because Alan was perfectly helpless, and absolutely dependent upon him for everything.

"I'd tell him t' go right ahead an' shoot," said he to himself. "An' then see who'd keep th' fire burnin' or even get him a drink!"

Behind him, in the cabin, the crippled man struggled painfully upright to a sitting position. He knew now, beyond all doubt, that just as soon as opportunity presented itself, Turnbull would take the gold and leave him.

"I must do something," he told himself, half aloud. "I've got to think of some way to hold him here until my feet are well!"

But what, he asked himself in desperation, could he, or any other man in such helpless circumstances, do to prevent being abandoned and left alone to perish from cold and starvation? Both feet had been badly frozen; they were useless lumps of pain, swollen out of all size and shape, leaving him all but helpless within the narrow walls of their rude cabin of but a single room, almost without furniture.

"It's the gold," he determined. "It's too big a temptation to poor Bully."

At heart he felt sorry for Turnbull, as anxious to keep him from this crime as he was to save himself. Men alone in the wilds, as he well knew, are soon obsessed with strange fantasies, and, brooding thus, will do unusual and incredible things they never would even dream about back in the towns.

While he had lain there unconscious, Bully had been thinking too much about their gold, a fortune to him who never had anything, and such is the history of this mischief-making metal, however rare and precious it may be, that it has perverted even better men to even more odious deeds of cruelty and dishonor. Turnbull, though ignorant and superstitious, was not usually a bad or dangerous comrade.

An unfortunate combination of circumstances had brought about the state of affairs which now threatened the life of Alan MacLeod. A frosted foot is a calamity in that northern wilderness. That Alan should meet with such an accident was due entirely to his inexperience with Arctic winters. He had never prospected so far north before. But they had been fortunate, even

though they stayed a bit too late in order to work out their "pocket."

Then, in preparation for their return, Alan had gone hunting alone, for they had but one rifle to obtain meat for their long journey south. An unusual and almost unprecedented storm had overtaken him, when he was not dressed for it, and in his struggle back to the cabin, he had broken through the thin ice over a spring hole and got his feet wet.

Instead of stopping to build a fire, no easy task in a blinding snowstorm and a bitter wind, he hurried on, knowing that he was not far from the cabin, and never realizing that his feet were freezing. This was now two days gone, and all the time since had been hours of agony out of which he was but now emerging to full consciousness and understanding.

Outside, he heard the *creak creak* of Bully's shoe packs as the heavy man made his way slowly to the near-by lake to chop out and pull up their fyke net, which they kept set in the shallow water to augment their meager supply of food. It would take the man about half an hour to do this, and within that short space of time, Alan MacLeod must do something to save his life!

Weapons would not serve him now, weak and crippled as he was, unable to stand the strain of continued vigilance and wakefulness. He was too weak to think of utilizing his physical strength. Now his wits must serve, his mind prove that it is always master of the flesh, or he would perish. He must remove, somehow, this temptation which had destroyed the faith and loyalty of his comrade and made of him a madman. He must get rid of the gold!

"How?" he cried in desperation, striking his forehead with his clenched fist. "How?"

III

ALIKE do burns and frostbites, akin in their destructiveness to human flesh, inflict the extreme heights of indescribable pain, a dire warning that the tender flesh of man must not be exposed to extremes of heat and cold; a command that, once so stricken, the patient must remain inactive and immobile until the invisible cell forces have repaired the damage.

So it seemed to Alan MacLeod that never was physical agony or inhuman torture so acute and unendurable as this first attempt to move his throbbing feet. They bulked huge and helpless in swollen deformity, and

the slightest movement brought new extremes of agonizing nerve pressure. But move them he did, inch by inch, his drawn face knotted with bulging muscles, his teeth grinding audibly in the stillness of the cabin, as his mind dominated his physique.

He knew that he must move; that he must do what little he could. He determined that any physical pain, however acute, should not prevent one final effort to save the precious gift of life—the life that throbbed in his brain and was housed in his pain-racked body. Already he could hear the faint *chop, chop, chop* of the ax as Bully broke the ice above the net. Soon he would be back, and then it would be too late.

Slowly, painfully, he moved toward the outer edge of the bunk, thankful when his senses left him as he rolled out to the floor. But the very agony of his feet thumping heavily down revived him. As soon as the height of this paroxysm of pain had been conquered, he began to hitch himself slowly forward on his right hip, swinging his body from the fulcrum of his arms, dragging his useless legs behind him. The all-powerful instinct of self-preservation, the will to live, drove him on, and even numbed the suffering of his slow progress across the floor. The mind is ever ready to overcome or discount physical handicaps, and he got along much better than he anticipated, with greater speed and much more freedom of movement.

Alan had as yet no plan, nor any idea of what he was to do, or could do, except that he was determined to destroy, or render impotent, this yellow demon of the gold that threatened his existence and promised a horrible death. If no method of total destruction suggested itself, and he failed to find any secure hiding place wherein to conceal it effectively, then he meant to scatter every grain and particle of it far and wide over the cabin floor, down the cracks between the hewn planks, anywhere, but in such a thorough manner that Bully would be days and days getting it back together again. This, at least, would delay Bully's departure, and give Alan time to think up other ways and means.

The wind, in its activity, follows closely the accepted routine of all nature, in that every thought first must have its nucleus, its single idea cell, upon which to build and plan a mental structure. It so chanced that, as Alan was dragging himself along

without any conception of what he could do, his right hand encountered a clattering object on the darkened floor. He picked it up, and recognized it as Bully's large pocket knife.

The man had been using it to cut strings while packing the duffel bag, and when surprised and interrupted, in his haste to conceal his sinister purpose, he had overlooked his knife. There was still a chance that he had not missed it even yet. With the discovery of this knife came an idea. Lost—found—disappear—magic—Swiftly his mind began to build up a complete structure of thought around this theme. There was just a chance—

With the assistance of the stool, he pulled himself up to his knees and studied the room carefully. Then, with great pain and deliberation, he tossed the knife across the room into a small cardboard box on the wall shelf. The acquired skill of country horseshoe pitching enabled him, with good luck, to accomplish this feat the first time.

Near by was the littered table, piled with dirty dishes and other evidence of Bully's shiftless housekeeping. Alan searched this hurriedly, and soon uncovered the aluminium case containing his companion's glasses; the man could not see to read or do exacting work without them. This case Alan tossed into the deep wood ashes, piled high against the sides of the fireplace, where it sank instantly out of sight.

"Now," he said, with new hope, "I think I see a way!"

He dropped back to the floor and began to hitch forward to the box wherein the ten round, fat, leather pokes of gold dust were concealed.

IV

"WASN'T nothin' in th' net," announced Bully, as he came stamping into the cabin empty-handed.

But the man reeked of fresh fish!

Beyond a doubt, as the nose of Alan attested, Bully was lying. There had been fish in the trap, and he had taken them out to hide them as additional provision for his carefully planned long march alone back to civilization. There was no question now but that he fully meant to abandon Alan at the first opportunity.

"Guess I'll have t' move that trap," said Bully, a bit too loquaciously. "We ain't caught a thing in it for a week or more."

This simple sentence gave Alan just the

lead he required if ever his wits were to save his life.

"I'll make a charm for it," said he very seriously.

"A what?" in surprise.

"A fish charm," answered Alan as convincingly as he could. "All Indians use fish charms in their nets."

"You save your strength!" grumbled Bully. "Nothin' to thet charm business."

"I'm not so sure about that," argued Alan.

"Huh-huh!" in derision. "I knowed a Swede wunst who wore a charm 'gainst shipwreck, an' he was drowned!"

With each hurried beat of his heart, Alan felt the fever mounting in his suffering body. The exertion had been tremendous, for one so weak and crippled, and he had only just reached the security of the bunk as Bully returned. Only by the greatest mental effort and will power could he concentrate his wavering thoughts on the important task ahead. Like specters, like ghostly moths in a bar of light, extraneous thoughts flitted through his fevered brain, meaningless words, snatches of sentences, attesting his suffering. But no sign of this showed upon his calm face, or struck a false note in his low and steady speech.

"You never been very sick, have you, Bully?"

"I never been sick a day in my life," superstitiously knocking the wooden table before him.

"If you had, Bully; if you had been near to death, as I have so many times—so near that, seemingly, the very soul of me left this body and wandered free where-soever it pleased—then you wouldn't be so sure about the impotency of charms and the folly of barbaric magic and enchantment."

"All I ever seen was a damned lot o' humbug," snorted Bully.

"Maybe most of it is, Bully. There are charlatans and pretenders in all professions, but some of the things those old medicine men do look mighty peculiar."

"Couldn't fool me with any Injun hocus-pocus," Turnbull replied, wondering what this was all about.

"Probably not. But you know, Bully, I learned quite a lot about taboos and charms and mystic rites the winter I spent with the Ojibwas."

Bully stood there by the table, looking at Alan, a bit puzzled, wondering if the man really was conscious, or hovering, as

he had for hours, just between sanity and delirium. A weird note in Alan's voice held him. Bully was ignorant, and filled with all the superstitions of his kind, even though he did not admit it. He believed in luck, in acts and charms to propitiate it; there was a lucky piece in his pocket that very minute. He also believed that bad luck could be avoided or driven away.

"That was the winter I was trapping along the Salediro," Alan continued. "A thieving wolverine bit me in the hand, shamming death after I shot it, and the wound became badly infected. It being several hundred miles to the nearest white doctor, I went over to the Ojibwas, where their chief medicine man, old To-ba-de-ah, charmed the evil out of my hand."

"It would 'a' got well anyhow," said Bully.

"Perhaps; but it was black to my elbow, and bigger than a boxing glove. Anyhow, the old shaman never put a thing on it. I got interested in Indian magic, and began to study his methods."

"I'll bet you learned a lot!" sneeringly.

Bully stood there listening, half interested, half to humor the sick man, because he thought this rambling talk but the beginning of another long spell of unconsciousness that would give him an opportunity to strip the cabin and depart.

"Those old medicine men can do some strange and remarkable things," said MacLeod, in a chanting voice. "While I was there a young buck killed a girl because she refused to be his third wife, and the chiefs in council sentenced him to death. No one ever touched him, no one went near him. The medicine man pronounced the death sentence in the center of the village, and after that the guilty man could neither eat or drink, and in a few weeks he was dead."

"Probably they poisoned him."

"They poisoned his mind, Bully, and that is just as fatal."

V

"PROBABLY I wouldn't have learned much about this magic, Bully, but for the fact that I saved the old medicine man's son from being trampled by a wounded moose during a hunt. After that, he was so grateful, he made me a blood brother, with all the savage rites and ceremonies, and initiated me in the mysterious ways of the shamans. One of the most mysterious

things that he taught me was the magic of invisibility."

"You don't mean to tell me you can make yourself so I can't see you?" Turnbull roared with laughter. "I'd like to see you do it!"

"Perhaps not exactly that, Bully," very seriously, "but I learned how to free my spirit from the flesh, and to travel thus invisible anywhere I please, even into the hearts and minds of men, so that I can see things, and understand things you would think it impossible for me to know."

The very suggestion of any such mystic power startled the guilty Turnbull.

"You'll have t' show me," brazenly.

"Well, Bully, that isn't going to be very difficult. You see me here helpless, unable to get up or stand erect, but all the time my spirit is free to go where it pleases. And I was with you, Bully. You may call it imagination, if you will, but I was standing right beside you when you took those fish out of the net, and I saw you hang them up in a tree."

The guilty man's face went suddenly white. Here was magic, nothing else. Here was the proof he sought; for it was obviously impossible that the crippled man could have seen him do this, not even from the doorway of the cabin!

"That's all jest your damned crazy 'magination," he bellowed, to hide his discomfort. "Jest your delirious 'magination runnin' riot with your better sense."

"Well, maybe so, Bully, but it seems real enough to me," MacLeod insisted, knowing that he had guessed right, as his keen nose prompted, and realizing, with relief, that now he had his companion puzzled and bewildered, and in a proper state of mind for further experiment. "But this magic isn't restricted to my spirit, Bully; I can make other things—material things—vanish or reappear at command."

"That proves you're loony right now," said Turnbull, turning away.

"Wait a minute, Bully." Alan raised himself on one elbow for the supreme effort, fought back the pain of this, and looked straight into the shifting eyes of his superstitious companion. "I'll show you whether I can do it or not. *Ah-la-leh-gwah-ta-me-la.*" This was nothing more than meaningless jargon, spoken in a spooky voice, and accompanied by mysterious gestures. "Now your pocket knife is gone!"

The eerie words, the weird voice, awed him. Bully clapped one grimy fist to the pocket where he always carried his knife, and his jaw dropped in astonishment when he failed to find its bulging presence there. Frantically he began to search all his pockets, confident that he had put it somewhere in his clothing; puzzled he was, and mystified.

"No use looking for it," said Alan, with new enthusiasm for the desperate game he was playing, with his life at stake. "Your knife has disappeared."

"I've lost it somewhere," stammered Bully. "I'll bet it dropped out of my pocket down to the lake."

"No," said Alan, "you didn't lose it down at the lake. But it is a good knife, and I know you would hate to lose it, so I will bring it back."

"Right in my pocket?" astounded.

"That would be too easy!" He chanted more meaningless words, and making mysterious passes with his hands. "Now you will find your knife, Bully, in that little box on the shelf."

The puzzled man whirled about and, with one stride, thrust his hand into the box; to his surprise and consternation, the knife was there! Now he was a bit frightened, for he knew that he had not put the knife there, and he knew, or thought he knew, that even if Alan had found the knife he could not have walked across the floor and stood upright to put it in the box.

"You needn't try any more o' that funny business on me," he glared sullenly. "You leave me alone!"

"Well, you thought I couldn't do it, Bully."

"I've heard tell o' folks bein' bewitched and wizardlike when they're 'bout so sick."

"I'll give you one more demonstration of my powers," said Alan.

"No, you don't!"

Alan raised to a sitting position, and the pain of this movement gave his white face a look of dreadful doom that fairly made the frightened Bully shiver. He pronounced the magic words slowly in a deep impressive voice.

"Now your spectacles are gone, Bully."

The mystified man straightened up with a jerk, recovering himself sufficiently to begin another frantic search of his pockets, and not finding the case, whirled to search the near-by table.

"You give me back my specks," he de-

manded petulantly. "You know I can't see good without them!"

"You will find your glasses, Bully," MacLeod continued, confident now of the ultimate success of his scheme, "in the ashes of the fireplace, near the southeast corner."

Without a word, humbled and frightened, Bully went to the fireplace and dug out his spectacle case with shaking hands.

"And now, Bully," beginning the final demonstration, to which all this was but a necessary prelude to make it impressive, "I have decided that, while I am crippled up this way, and knowing your many weaknesses, that it is best to remove all temptation from your presence."

"Eh—what?" He did not understand.

"I'm not going to die, Bully. I am going to get well. But it will take time, and you will have to stay here and take care of me. You always were in a hurry to spend your money, Bully; and lest our gold tempt you to run away and leave me behind, I shall remove it."

"Don't you dare put any spell on my gold!" He jumped before the treasure box as though to protect it from this occult influence with his body.

His very attitude, the frightened tone of his voice, evidenced that he more than half believed that his companion could do this very thing, and this was exactly the frame of mind Alan desired and had planned for.

"It's too late now," smiled Alan. "Our gold has already vanished!"

"Gone?" in a hoarse whisper. "Our gold gone?"

"Vanished," said Alan, dropping back, exhausted, "until I choose to wish it back again."

With nervous fingers Bully tossed aside the coverings and threw open the treasure box.

It was quite empty!

VI

For a minute Bully crouched there over the empty box, as dangerous as a wounded bear, hot anger surging through him and beating down the newly inspired fear of the unknown.

"Give me my gold!" he roared hoarsely.

He came slowly toward Alan, his big hands working convulsively by his sides, his bearded face drawn and twisted. The loss of the gold overpowered all other emotions. And he who had been ready to abandon a

comrade in distress for the yellow grains, was now capable of even worse to effect its recovery.

"Give me back that gold!" he insisted, in a deep-throated growl, as he towered over the helpless Alan.

"I haven't got the gold, Bully," in a faint voice.

He stood over Alan now, breathing in breast-heaving gasps like a maddened bullock. His thick fingers itched for Alan's throat, but something the magic had instilled deep within his brain stayed his eager hands. The gold was gone out of the box, but he was not ready yet to believe that it had gone far, or of its own volition. Fifty pounds of heavy gold is not easily moved, even by a well man, and certainly it could not be hidden for long in a little wilderness cabin.

"You think you're damned smart," snarled Bully, as reason returned. "Crawl in' out an' hiding our gold. I'll mighty soon show you!"

"Look around," said Alan weakly. "Hunt all you like, Bully. Take a few days at it; you won't find the gold."

"If I don't find that gold in five minutes, I'll—"

"And let me warn you, Bully," said Alan, "don't do anything you will regret. Don't forget that I alone can make that gold reappear any time I please—and you can't!"

Bully only barely heard this last; he was busy searching the cabin. He began at the bunk, and fairly tore it apart, with Alan upon it, rolling him about regardless of the agony it caused him. He found nothing—not a grain of gold. Then he went through the cabin like a prowling wolverine; into every box and can, every bit of clothing, every possible place where even a spoonful of gold might be hidden; searching the chimney, and digging into the ashes of the fireplace, and found nothing.

"You've hid it somewhere," he shouted, "an' I'll find it, if it takes a week!"

"It will take longer than that," smiled Alan, "and the search for it will give you something to occupy your attention while I am getting well."

The hewn planks of the floor were only laid in place, and these Bully prized up, one by one, and inspected the ground beneath with a lighted candle. The earth was frozen hard as stone, and there was no trace of gold. It was apparent at once that

even a strong man could not have hidden anything of size there without hours of hard labor with pick and shovel, and even then his work would have betrayed the fact.

There were two small windows covered with oiled muslin tacked into place, and, though these showed no signs of having been disturbed, Bully tore them down and peered out into the unmarked snow. If even a single nugget of the gold had been dropped out of either window the unmistakable imprint in the snow would have advertised the fact to any searcher. The finer dust would be there in a glittering yellow powder upon the snow itself.

It was evident that the gold had not been tossed out of the windows. Nor could it be in the cabin. Bully went outdoors and studied the situation carefully. The little cabin was entirely surrounded by nearly two feet of unbroken, soft, and fluffy snow. Beneath this was about three inches of frozen sleet, and under this the ground, frozen hard for several feet. Not even a small bird could hop about on that new snow without leaving a record of every movement.

On three sides of the cabin, he assured himself, the snow had not been disturbed in any way, not even by a single grain of gold. The front of the cabin, except for a few feet close by the door, was also undisturbed. So he was fairly sure that no one had come out of the cabin.

A single pathway led from the cabin door down to the lake, with branches to their supply of firewood and the pole frame whereon they hung their frozen meat. This path was hard packed and frozen like ice. A hole large enough to hide the gold could not have been worked down into it without the aid of the ax, which Bully had with him at the time, and then only at the expense of much hard labor. It was certain that the gold was not buried there. And he very soon satisfied himself that it had not been concealed in the snow on either side of this path or about the doorway.

"Somebody's been here," he declared, as he stamped back into the cabin. "Somebody's been here an' took our gold."

"Don't be a fool, Bully," said Alan. "You have only to look at the snow outside to know that no one has been here."

VII

ALL that day Alan slept, while the baffled Bully searched and researched the cab-

in. He was not quite ready to believe that Alan, or any one else, could mumble a few words, make a few mysterious gestures, and cause ten heavy sacks of gold dust to disappear. The thing was incredible, preposterous. And yet, and yet— Certainly their gold was gone.

It had disappeared during the few minutes he was down at the lake. And he had searched and searched without finding a single grain of it, or any evidence of the skin pokes. That a sick man, a cripple, unable to walk or stand erect, could conceal fifty pounds of gold in that barren cabin so cleverly that he could not find it, was unbelievable. And gold could not be destroyed by any earthly means in Alan's power. It certainly savored of magic!

And, if magic it was, then magic must bring it back. If Alan had hidden it, he must disclose the hiding place!

Chagrin, anger, disappointment, gave him courage, and Alan was weak and crippled. He'd make him tell where it was or bring it back!

Alan awakened in new agonies of pain as Bully shook him roughly by the shoulder.

"Wake up," he commanded; "wake up, you!"

"Don't be so rough, Bully—"

"I'll be a damned sight rougher 'fore I get through," he roared. "You tell me what you done with that gold."

"It's gone, Bully; it isn't here."

"Well, then you bring it back mighty quick," he threatened, "or I'll make you wish them feet had dropped off days ago."

He brought his left fist down on Alan's throbbing left foot, and an explosion of pain shot through his entire body. Alan groaned and sagged back to limp unconsciousness. Then Bully realized that he had overdone the thing, for Alan, unconscious, couldn't tell him where the gold was, even if he would. When he recovered and opened his eyes, Alan saw Bully sitting on a low stool before the bunk, the loaded rifle in his hands.

"A low down trick you played on me, Mac, takin' my gold," said he angrily. "I'll give you jest five minutes t' tell me where it is, or t' bring it back, or I'll blow your crazy brains out!"

Alan studied the brutal face with wide gray eyes, wondering; but he was not afraid. He felt sure that so long as he held the secret of their gold, Bully dared not harm him.

"If I brought the gold back, Bully," said he quietly, "you would pack up and leave me."

"No, I wouldn't," he lied.

"And then I would die of starvation, of cold, and neglect, slowly and painfully. So you might just as well shoot me now, Bully, and have it over with quickly. Then I'll die knowing that it cost you ten thousand dollars for my funeral."

Slowly the truth of this dawned upon Bully. To destroy Alan was to lose all hope of recovering the gold. He got up, defeated, and sat the rifle back in the corner nearest the door.

"And if you want to go back alone and empty-handed, Bully, leaving me here to perish, go right on. I'll die rich, anyway!"

"You know I ain't goin' t' leave you, Mac," in complete surrender.

"I'm fairly certain of it now," said Alan, "but you stay right here and look after me until I get on my feet again, and we'll go home together with our little fortune."

"You know I always meant t' look after you, Mac."

"I know a lot of things," smiled Alan, "including the secret of our gold dust!"

VIII

EVERY night Bully went to sleep firmly convinced of the mystic powers of his comrade, believing that Alan had spirited away their gold, and could bring it back at will. Certainly there was no other way to explain its mysterious disappearance. And every morning he got up cursing himself for a fool, and began the search all over again.

He went over and over the cabin until it became a kind of hopeless game with him, an obsession, which prompted him to look again and again into the same places, as though the gold might be eluding him by some subtle magic of locomotion. He searched the chimney, prying into the clay mortar between the stones, under the hearth; even under the fire itself. He went over the cabin, log by log and plank by plank, until he was thoroughly satisfied that if Alan had hidden a single gold nugget no larger than a pea anywhere within the cabin, he must have found it.

Though it snowed more from time to time, and the winds harried the snow for days on end, he was not satisfied with the ocular evidence that the gold had not been tossed out of the windows or the door. So

he fashioned a snow shovel and searched all around the cabin, carefully removing all the snow and searching for scattered grains of gold.

He found nothing.

Bully was a placer miner by occupation. He had searched for gold all his life. If there had been a spoonful of gold dust in the cabin or under it, or on the earth outside of it, certainly he would have found it.

In the end there was, to him, no other explanation of its strange disappearance, so thorough and effective, all within a few minutes of time, other than that Alan had spirited it away by enchantment. Half believing, half doubting, he sought additional proof of Alan's power.

"Let's see you make this watch of mine disappear," he demanded.

"What for?" asked Alan.

"Oh, jest fer fun," said Bully. "Let's see you make this old ticker of mine disappear right out of my pocket, like you did my knife."

"It's one of the laws of the shamans, Bully, never to do these mystic things for entertainment, or for any useless purpose whatsoever."

"You can't do it," boasted Bully. "You make this watch of mine disappear right out of my vest, when I know it's there, then I'm ready to believe anything."

"No, Bully, I couldn't convince you." Alan was sitting bolstered up in bed by now, rereading an old newspaper. "But I would like a drink of water."

Disappointed, Bully got up to bring him the tin cup filled with water. As he bent over the bunk, Alan sipped, and was immediately taken with a violent choking, dashing the cup aside, lurching forward, tossing the newspaper up under Bully's face.

"Look out what you're doin'," warned Bully.

"I'll have to sit up a bit more to drink," said Alan.

Bully raised him up, and he drank, returning the cup.

"Anything else you want?" asked Bully, as he returned the cup to the table.

"Yes," said Alan. "What time is it?"

Bully reached into his vest pocket for his watch, and froze to immobility like a man stricken with syncope. His watch was gone!

"My watch!" he gasped, in a hollow voice.

"You haven't lost your watch, have you, Bully?"

Bully's legs grew suddenly weak, and he sank down to the stool to gaze at Alan as *Faust* must have looked at *Mephistopheles* for the first time.

"You wizarded away my watch," said he hoarsely; "an' it was sich a good watch!"

"Well, if you want it so badly," said Alan, who had deftly taken it from Bully's pocket as he bent over him with the water, "you will find it in my old boot under the bunk."

Never after that did Bully doubt Alan's magic. He ceased to look for the lost gold.

"Suppose anything should happen to you," he sighed.

"Then you would have to go home alone, and broke."

"It ain't usin' me fair," said Bully. "Half o' thet gold was mine."

"It's up to you, Bully, to see that nothing happens to me until I am up on whatever is left of my feet."

IX

BULLY, baffled and vanquished, was now Alan's devoted slave.

Firmly convinced that the gold was spirited away by his comrade's magic, he realized that the only way he would ever get it back was to do what he could to hasten Alan's recovery.

"Clean up that table and scrub the dishes," said Alan.

"Yes, Mac." And he went about it instantly.

"And then you heat me some water, boiling hot, and bring me my razor. A couple of these toes will have to come off."

"Don't you touch 'em," scared at the very thought.

"I'll be laid up here all winter if I don't."

"You may bleed t' death, or get blood poison agin!"

"Got to take a chance."

"Maybe you'd better bring our gold back now, in case anything should happen," suggested Bully.

"Let me tell you, Bully, that gold and I go or stay here together."

The water was heated, the razor and a newly sharpened knife duly sterilized in the boiling water, and Alan performed his own surgery, not unskillfully. The ends

of three toes were dead, and therefore without feeling. He removed them at the joint and bandaged the skin flaps in place. By now most of the swelling in his legs had disappeared, and the injured tissues of his feet were being repaired and reconstructed. Soon the pains peculiar to all severe frost-bites had vanished, and he was able to get up from his bed.

"If you can't walk, I'll drag you out on the sledge," said Bully. "We ought t' get started."

"I'll be walking soon," promised Alan. "Lots of men up here in the north are hitting the trails with most of their toes gone."

X

SLASHING white snows whirled down out of the north, deeper and deeper, worried by the pounding wings of the ever blowing polar winds. Winds swept the rocky heights and the high ridges of land as with brooms; bleak, barren drabness against the white, whereon the stolid musk ox fed, impervious to all cold. Wind piled the constantly shifting snow deep in every hollow, dropping it behind every obstruction, until only the soft footed white hares, and the big pawed northern lynx, changed white with the season, could move about in safety.

The bears slept in their caverns, and dreamed of sweet, ripening berries and fat, whistling marmots. The long legged moose beat out their endless paths in the thick shelter of shadowy evergreen swamps, and there was *click-click-click* of thousands of caribou hoofs, like the beat of barbaric castanets, as the gray ghosts drifted down before the storms, vague phantom forms in mists of whirling snow.

The very weight of all this accumulated snow packed it down to earth, the winds settled it, and the frost crept in—a frost that was like some material substance touching everything to solidity with its cold fingers, bridging the treacherous waters and crusting the deep snow until both would hold the weight of men and sledges.

It was time they started south.

Alan's feet were still tender; very susceptible to cold; but they were healed, and fairly strong again. By taking it easy and going slowly, with due caution, on the first stages of their long journey; by riding occasionally on the sledge when the going was good, he felt that he could make it. So they began to pack up and make ready

for the long delayed start back to civilization and the frontier towns of the north.

"What about th' gold?" asked Bully, anxiously.

"The gold will be here when we are ready for it," assured Alan.

"I'll bet we never see it again," Turnbull remarked dubiously.

"Don't you worry, Bully."

"Jest th' same-ee, I ain't figurin' none on what I'm goin' t' buy with my half when I get back!"

"There'll be lots of things for you to buy, Bully."

"Yeah!" in disgust. "There always was; but I ain't never had th' cash t' buy 'em with!"

"You will this time," Alan promised.

"You'll have t' show me."

They worked on in silence, Bully still puzzling over the mysterious disappearance of their gold, and fearful that even the occult powers of his companion never could bring it back. They loaded the sledge indoors, where it was warm and convenient, packing their equipment, the extra clothing and food, in canvas duffel bags that are easily lashed in place.

"You go down to the lake and pull up the net," bade Alan.

"You ain't goin' t' lug that rottin' old net along, be you?" questioned Bully.

"We won't leave it set in the lake," said Alan. "Might be a fish in it, and I can imagine how it would feel to be helpless in there."

Bully picked up the ax and reluctantly went down to the lake to chop out the net, leaving Alan busy with the problem of what they ought to take and what they could leave behind to await their return the following spring. He was still busy choosing and discarding when Bully came stamping in with the frozen net hanging from his shoulder like a crystal veil, a rim of white frost on his black beard.

"There was two trout in it," said he.

"They will provide our last meal here," said Alan, without looking up from his work. "Drop them in the box in the corner."

This was the same box that once had held their treasured hoard of gold dust, and but lately used for the temporary storage of fish and meat which they did not desire to freeze up for future use. Bully lifted the lid of this box and tossed in the fish, but it proved too well filled with other

things to hold them. So he reached down to make room for them. His fingers encountered a familiar rounded surface, soft and leathery! He looked down quickly, peering into the box with staring eyes, and then straightened up, almost speechless.

"Lord!" he gasped, staring at Alan.

"What is it, Bully?"

"Th' gold," hoarsely; "it's come back!"

"Of course," said Alan; "I was rather expecting it."

"It wasn't there an hour ago!"

"Of course it wasn't, Bully!"

"You skeer me!" cried Bully, visibly afraid. "I don't like this magic business!"

"There wasn't any magic about it, Bully," laughed Alan.

"Don't tell me!" in all certainty. "Didn't I see it with my own eyes!"

"You thought you did, Bully, else you wouldn't have believed it. That is the secret of all magic. But there really wasn't any sorcery, except in your own puzzled head, incapable of any other solution, where such things always exist. Now that the gold is back, and mystery has served its purpose, I don't mind telling you, Bully. When I saw that you were being overpowered by temptation, I hid it on the roof."

"You hid it on the roof?" doubtfully.

Still unconvinced, Bully dashed outdoors to see for himself. Beside the doorway in the snow lay a stout pole from the woodpile, with several projecting stubs where limbs had been struck off with the ax. He could see the marks in the snow where Alan had placed this pole against the cabin and climbed up to the roof while he was down to the lake after the net. And there was evidence that he, or some one, had been digging around up there in the snow.

"You couldn't 'a' put it up there, all

crippled up like you were," he said, as he came back inside. "You're jest tryin' t' cover up your devil-devil business."

"A thing is always best hidden, Bully, in the very place where it couldn't possibly be secreted!"

"Nigh fifty pounds o' gold, up on th' roof, an' you unable t' walk or stand! Don't tell me!"

"I wasn't quite so helpless as you thought; no man ever is." He smiled as though it were a good joke, now that all danger was safely over. "While you were down to the lake, I crawled out of the bunk and dragged myself across the floor to the gold. Then I tossed it, sack by sack, to the doorway."

"From just outside the door, where you could not see me, I threw it, a sack at a time, here and there upon the roof, where it sank down in the soft snow, safely out of sight. I figured you wouldn't think to look up there, and the angle of the roof made it impossible for you to see the scattered round holes in the snow. The next day the wind filled them level full."

"What did you go an' do that for?" demanded Bully in injured innocence.

"To prevent you from making a fool of yourself, Bully; and, if you had thought that the gold was hidden anywhere around here, you would have kept up the search until you found it."

"You was pretty sick," said Bully sadly, as one badly judged and recently imposed upon. "You did a lot o' funny stunts. You raved for hours an' hours, an' 'maged lots o' fool things. Why, you even accused me o' tryin' t' sneak away an' leave you up here all alone t' die. Can you imagine that?"

"I can," said Alan. "I'm sorry."

THE SONG OF THE RIVER

THE river's song was sad before,

But hope was in its sorrow:

There seemed a note in it that said

You might come back to-morrow.

But now to-day as I go by,

It has no note to cheer me;

Its song must be all sadness now,

Till you again are near me.

Richard Le Gallienne

The Bill Poster

IT WAS A TREMENDOUS SHOCK TO BILL STRAKER AND HIS
FIANCÉE WHEN HE SUDDENLY AND UNEXPECTEDLY
FOUND HIMSELF FAMOUS

By Hylton Cleaver

BILL STRAKER stood on a platform of the Underground. Though the day was hot, he wore a mackintosh, with the collar turned high up about his neck and buttoned underneath his nose. The brim of his soft hat was pulled down and hid his eyes. This not unnaturally excited casual remark, but he seemed to read a deeper meaning into the attention he aroused, for each time anybody looked at him he hunched his shoulders higher and thrust down his hands still deeper in his pockets. When the train came at last, Bill, disguised like that, gratefully got into it.

There was one vacant seat, and Bill was making for it when he noticed something terrible. Immediately behind that seat there was a framed advertisement, which represented him!

He staggered back and stood wedged in a corner by himself, with face averted. When some one told him that there was a seat, he answered ventriloquially from behind his collar, and waved his informant away. At the next station he got out in a panic, and, surrendering his ticket, went bounding up into the sunshine like a hunted criminal.

Ten seconds later he stood waiting for a bus, beside a billboard. On the billboard was an immense advertisement which smote the eye of every passer-by. Each was compelled to look up, and then each recoiled, staggering on in an attitude of self-defense. Bill, for his part, watched these people for a time, and then looked around. A moment later he was scurrying off into a doorway, like a rabbit.

Here he bought a paper. One of the printed pages contained his picture, and he swayed back with his hands against his eyes. It was a libelous snapshot of him-

self, enlarged. He was holding a tobacco pouch with hands like hams, inanely grinning over it, while just above the portrait was the ghastly slogan:

HAVE A SMOKE!

In that train, by that billboard, he had been beside the thing, as at the Royal Academy a man might stand before his own portrait. Everywhere people recognized him, and the worst was that Wanda did not yet know what had happened. Oh, what would Wanda say?

He called a taxi, and, springing in, huddled back into the corner in extreme alarm.

II

THERE can scarcely be a sight more appealing than that of a small child warmly tucked in bed and asking for forgiveness. If there is one, let the award be given to Bill as he crossed the room, a short while afterward, toward Wanda. Throughout that taxi drive he had hoped that he would be in time. He knew now that he was too late, for Wanda held a newspaper, and it was folded at the dreaded page.

Fresh from a holiday, Wanda had reached town with her family the night before, and Bill had had half an hour with her alone. To-day she had contracted to take lunch with him, but he could see at a glance that the lunch would be a cold one.

He crossed the room with hands held ready to gesticulate. He had scarcely said: "I can explain it all," when Wanda laid on her barrage. Like a worthy soldier, he promptly dug in at the spot that he had reached.

"Before you speak, Bill, let me say a word. I've been here half an hour all ready

for a scene, and nothing's going to hold me back. If you're going to explain, all right; but if I don't tell you what I think, something will crack, and I shall have hysterics all over the room!"

Bill made another pacifying gesture, but Wanda had paused only to take breath.

"You know what London's like after a holiday. I woke this morning with the blues. I thought that wouldn't be very nice for you, so I got up early, and by about eight I was making briskly for the park. It seemed to me, Bill, that they were building everywhere, and that around every building there were billboards." Straker groaned silently. "I only mention what it seemed. Perhaps there were only four or five, but I think there were fifty; and from each one you—I swear it's you—leaned out toward the crowd with hands cupped around a pouch, and advertised tobacco. I've not been in the tube yet." Bill knew one moment's gratitude. "So far I haven't seen you leering at me from the sides of busses, either, but when I got back here, all shaken up, and nearly crying, I saw the paper. There's no mistake—it is you. Bill, you're *everywhere* with an *insufferable* tobacco pouch! Oh, Bill, what ever have you done?"

She paused again, but, as Bill hurried forward with extended hand, she stopped him, speaking feverishly.

"You're not going to pretend it isn't you?" she said. "You won't make out I've made a ludicrous mistake about my own *fancé*? If you do that, Bill, I shall run at you and scream!"

Bill motioned helplessly.

"A million people buy this paper, and about twenty see each copy. Your face is going to be wrapped around raw meat and fish. Bill, it's disgusting!"

Bill crept a little closer.

"I can explain," he said. His voice was hushed.

"You may explain, but how on earth can you undo the harm? There's nowhere now where we can go to lunch and be sure that you won't be recognized."

"Wanda, it's terrible," said Bill. "I have come here to find sanctuary."

"Is there a crowd outside?"

"No, but my little world seems full of faces."

"You must have known how it would be. Did you suppose the tobacco people would buy this picture and then hide it?"

"They bought no photograph from me," said Bill.

"They didn't?" Her eyes brightened. Her battle spirit was aroused. "Why, then, you've got cause for an action! I'll go with you to-day and get an injunction!"

"Wait," Bill replied, a little crushed. "They bought no photograph from me, but they did buy a photograph."

"From whom?"

"A wretched friend of mine," said Bill.

Wanda arranged her mouth on new lines, sat down, and pointed to a chair that faced her.

"Sit," she told him.

Bill obstinately moved to Wanda's side. There was abundant room. He hitched his trouser knees up, and was in mid-air, ready bent, when Wanda tapped his arm.

"No—we'll have this out properly. Sit there!"

"Last night," said Bill, "you said you loved me still."

"Sit there, and tell me how they got this photograph!"

Bill drew a footstool toward her and sat at her feet.

"Don't look a martyr," Wanda said.

"I'm the one with the grievance."

"This man I'm talking about," said Bill, "is poverty stricken. He calls himself an advertising agent, and he's keen on photography. Some months ago he took some photographs of me to try out a new lens."

"Seems like a severe test," remarked Wanda.

"He said it didn't matter what he took, and so, while I was reading, he kept pottering with the innards of the thing and snapping at me like a serpent. Once I got up to stretch my legs, and I was going to have a pipe. I had my pouch out, and I went toward him. He said something, I suppose, that made me grin, and while he was crouching behind the trigger, it suddenly went off. If you were photographed when you were not expecting it, you'd probably be in some extraordinary attitude."

"I don't get in extraordinary attitudes."

"But it's the camera. Look at the way race horses get their impossible legs."

"This photograph is *like* you—that's what I complain about."

"Nonsense! The hands," Bill answered, "are distorted—as your feet would be if I snapped them from this stool."

Wanda leaned forward.

"What I desire to know is how they came to get it."

"Well, some time afterward this fellow wrote and told me that some of these snaps had turned out very well, and asked if I would mind if he sent one in for a competition. I wrote back that I didn't mind, and I heard nothing more until this plague of posters suddenly swept down on London. Nothing's going to stamp them out now. It may be my imagination, but it seems to me that I keep on seeing them. They jump out and bite at me, and go."

Wanda looked very dignified. If you may judge a girl as you may judge a man, by the way she shapes in extremities, then Wanda's hands and feet were proof of thorough breeding. She had long eyes and an infatuating voice. She wore the best part of a three-piece frock of rusty hue, and she still held the newspaper.

"Well, did you go to see this person?"

"I ran there so fast that my feet hardly touched the ground. He was astonished to find that I was angry. He grasped my hand. He said that he had won the competition and received two hundred pounds, and that I must go out to dinner with him and help spend a sovereign or two. Then it turned out that the competition was to get a poster for this foul tobacco, and that one of the rules was that the organizers got the copyright."

"But, Bill!" Wanda was sitting forward in appeal. "Think what it's going to mean! Why, if you told these people—"

"It's no good. He's had the money, and he's spent it. He has a letter from me giving him permission to send my picture in for the competition, and now the thing's been circulated everywhere. I should have no case at all."

"Then your friend should be sent to prison!"

"I agree, but he seems surprised that I should object. He says I've won fame in a night."

Wanda sat very still.

"So that's all you've done?"

"Except to keep my collar turned up."

"Why didn't you confess to me last night, and save me the shock of finding out by chance?"

"I came here this morning to explain. It seemed too bad to blurt it out last night, when we were so happy. I didn't know you'd go out early, and it's the first day it's been in the newspapers."

"I don't think you come out of it very well," said Wanda.

"I don't come out of it at all. I thought of going around at night and pasting bits of paper over every face, but it would take me years."

"It's going to be terrible for me!"

Bill looked surprised.

"For you? But what do you think I feel?"

"That's what I'd like to know," replied Wanda.

"Why, then, I feel," said Bill a little heatedly, "as if a touch of womanly sympathy for me would not be out of place in this great trial."

"Sympathy!" She stood up. "Who's going to be sorry, then, for me?"

"For you? Why, everybody—every member of the English-speaking races. You'll have the sympathy of every soul who sees the thing, but no one, not one living body, will spare a thought for me. People look at me as I pass, and giggle. When they meet you, they'll be sorry. They'll call and leave their cards, and you'll have to return your grateful thanks and tell them how you're bearing up from day to day."

"There's no need to be funny, Bill."

"But they will be sorry for you—sorry you're engaged to such a silly kite. They'll advise you to break off with me and marry some one with a little sense."

"I can do that without advice," said Wanda carefully.

The silence was a startling one. It is peculiar how, when anybody makes a rather tactless observation in a crowded room, a silence instantaneously falls. In this particular case the silence was the more intense, because Bill alone was present. He looked at Wanda weirdly, and then, as nothing happened, he brought his head well forward on an apparently telescopic neck.

"What's that?"

"You heard me, I believe."

"But you don't mean it!"

"No?"

"You could break off with me, without advice?"

"Or with it."

"Solely because of this thing that I can't help?"

"How can I go about with you?"

Bill stood up, staring widely. Then he slowly turned and stumbled, steadying himself upon a chair. He looked as if he had

been bludgeoned. Nevertheless, his dignity was struggling to assert itself.

"Why, then," he said, "my hat is in the hall, I think."

He moved like an automaton, and Wanda waited, watching him. True to her sex, having made a statement that she did not intend to make, she was now engaged in brazening it out.

Bill reached the door, and, as he stretched out for the handle, missed it, and tried again, she spoke. Her voice was quiet and natural, but had a curious inflexion, though no one but an expert could have diagnosed it. She looked down at his feet. Her only possible way of withdrawal now was to pass the thing off with a light word.

"Do up your bootlace, Bill," she said.

Bill was not an expert, and if he heard her he paid no heed. And so, his one chance having come and gone, Wanda lifted her chin another inch and watched him go. As if the world had clattered down about his feet, he made his exit, stumbling over the broken pieces.

When he was out in the street again, he had no care for his disguise at all. His mackintosh flapped open, his hat was tilted back, and all the way he kept on muttering to himself.

"But I—I didn't sell the photograph! There must be something behind all this. She's been away and met another man. Now she wants an excuse, and this is it. She *couldn't* break it off because of this advertisement!" He turned and flung his hand out despairingly toward a passer-by. "I didn't sell the thing!"

The passer-by turned round.

"Your bootlace, sir."

Bill looked down at it dazedly, and wandered on.

It seemed hard that a man already stricken by a tragedy could not make a dramatic exit from a room without his bootlace flapping loose. Life is much too prone to interfere like this in memorable moments; but Bill Straker didn't care. He could walk with an untied bootlace if he liked, and for two pins he would untie the other, for henceforth nothing was going to count with him but that he had in one fell hour lost Wanda. The light of his life had been doused forever.

III

MOMENTS passed in heavy-footed manner, but Wanda still sat alone in the room

from which Bill had fled. Every now and then she looked inquisitively at the door, as if assuming that at any moment he was likely to come back. When he did not come, all her femininity assembled in her soul in preparation for an outburst; and you will know by now that nobody could be more feminine than Wanda when she so desired.

All she asked was that somebody else should be so ill advised as to make entrance now instead of Bill, because she would be ready to greet the interloper.

Once or twice she looked around for something that she could throw; but presently she thought better of it, and arranged herself at ease. She laid the paper near her, put her feet on the stool, folded her hands, and fixed her eyes upon the door. When it opened, she sat up stiffly.

A man came in. It was her brother. When one is feeling put about, nothing is more annoying than to have somebody else start to eat an apple. Wanda's brother was indubitably at his worst when following this pursuit. He tried to finish the luscious fruit, then elegantly touched his lips with a handkerchief, swallowed, and thus confronted her. Wanda spoke first.

"Well, Dudley?"

"Here! Have you seen this?"

"I have."

He tossed his head.

"Well, it's a nice thing, isn't it? A photograph of Bill! I really do think that of all the cheap ideas—"

"Cheap? Do you know how much they paid for that? Two hundred pounds."

"It wasn't worth it, then."

"But can you sell your photo for as much as that?"

The young man looked amazed. He drew back, held the paper farther out, and hit it.

"But you don't mean to say that you're pleased?"

"Why not?"

"The man you're going to marry?"

"What's that to do with you?"

"But it's his photograph!"

"I like it," Wanda answered earnestly.

"It's a good one."

Dudley stood for a moment utterly dumfounded, then turned to leave in haste and call up his reserves.

"You're going? Good!" said Wanda. "Now keep out. I never knew a man in all my life who took more pains to interfere

in other people's business, or who talked more rot than you and did it with his mouth half full of apple. It's disgusting!"

The door closed abruptly, and she could hear him hurrying down the hall and calling for the rest of the family.

Wanda's smile grew more grim. She loved a fight.

She stood up now, and pushed her chair away. She threw the newspaper far across the room, reached quickly for a cigarette, and lit it. She made the gesture of one who shoots cuffs.

The door was opened for the second time, and there came in a sister. Just down the hall she could hear her brother and her mother talking agitatedly.

"I bet you're pleased," said the sister in the doorway.

"How's that?" inquired Wanda.

"Bill's got himself into the papers."

Wanda looked up delightedly.

"Oh, that? By Jove, yes, isn't it splendid?"

The other's manner was suspicious.

"Well, I suppose it's a splendid joke."

"Tell me," said Wanda crisply, "do you mean this advertisement or not? If you do, and if you take it as a joke, you must be stupid. The very fact that every one has seen it shows that it must be a good advertisement. Bill stands out from this picture just as if he were alive."

"Then," said the other, "it is Bill!"

"Rather," said Wanda. "Good old Bill! He had the thing all ready for me as a big surprise when I came home, and I was out first thing this morning looking at the billboards. They're in full bloom, and Bill makes a splendid show." She clapped her hands. "There's one in Regent Street that fairly stings you."

The other girl was observing her peculiarly, but Wanda was already looking past her sister. Her brother had returned, and she could see her mother at his elbow, with her father bringing up the rear of the procession.

"Your father thinks this is in very bad taste, Wanda," she heard her mother say.

"The tobacco?"

"No—the picture," her brother replied heatedly.

"I don't understand."

"You always were a bit slow in the uptake, Wanda," said her sister.

"But is it bad taste if you earn two hundred pounds for a man who's broke, and

set him on his feet again? Is lucre filthy when you *give* it? Bill did this to help a friend. That mayn't go down with you, but it goes down with me."

"What you mean is that you'll go down with him—dragged down," her brother told her. "After his face is well known, they'll start appalling conversations on the most witless lines between him and some imaginary stranger in a silly hat who hasn't smoked the stuff. Bill will thrust out his tobacco pouch and say, 'In that case, for the first time in your life, man, *have a smoke!*'"

Her mother's voice cut in again from behind.

"I certainly do think Bill might have been more circumspect!"

"Bill mightn't have been anything but what he is. Bill's quite all right," persisted Wanda.

Her brother took a step toward her. He was warming to his argument.

"But can't you see, you silly girl, what's going to happen when you're married? Every one you introduce to him will know his face. How will your friends like that?"

"They'll be pleased to meet a famous man." She crossed the room in quick time, and began making her way through the group and out into the hall. "Well, I'm going for another walk," she said. "There must be lots of posters that I've not seen, and I want to find out where they are."

Her brother pointed vehemently.

"I can see through all this! You're simply standing up for him for pride's sake. It's not real a bit. No one could like such a thing!"

"Well, if you think Bill's done a rotten thing," snapped Wanda, "is it your business to come in and tell me so? You must be judges of good taste, indeed! And why isn't it real? He's simply done a thing you wouldn't have the pluck to do."

Her father pulled at his mustache and then dramatically released it.

"Wanda!"

At the same time her mother tottered and said "Wanda!" too, but in a different tone.

"Where are you going?" asked her sister.

"If Bill's in such a row," she replied, "then my place is beside him. I didn't realize you could be so impossible!"

Her brother shot a hand out, but she gave him the slip, hurried upstairs, and

went into her room. In an hour's time, when the family were tired of calling, she came down at leisure, wearing a singularly cunning little hat.

"I'm going out," she called. "You've given me a bright idea!"

IV

THE day had passed, and after it had come the night. By morning Bill was haggard, and he crawled from bed and faced another day dejectedly.

So far he had been too stunned to make a proper plan of action, but he had now begun to realize that some move on his part was called for. Should he go to Wanda in a contrite mood, and plead for mercy? Should he adopt the rôle of injured innocence and outraged dignity, or should he ring her up and just pretend that it was all a joke, which could immediately be forgotten? Should he write her a letter asking what she really meant, or should he simply go about his daily round as blithely as he could, and wait for news to reach her that he had been heard whistling? All these suggestions were presented to him on a sort of joy wheel of emotion, and were all discarded. He must take stronger action. He must go around again and see Tim Warren.

Tim was responsible for all this trouble, and Bill would compel him to adjust it. Tim called himself an advertising agent, but Bill would go around and tell him what he really was. That would occupy a good part of the morning, anyhow.

So Bill dressed, and, refusing breakfast and the morning paper, hurried downstairs, chartered a passing taxi, and was driven to the office that Tim Warren used as a permanent address for letters. Here he avoided the elevator, because he thought it would impress Tim more if he went stamping slowly up the stairs, hitting each step a sharp blow with his cane and thrusting out his chin. It did. Tim opened wide his door and looked out interestedly, a suave and hopeful figure, for the coming of a client was a notable event.

Tim was all ready to establish warmth of welcome when he saw Bill, and, somewhat disappointed, he went back into his room. Bill followed close behind him.

"I thought you were a customer," said Tim.

"You don't have customers."

"Don't I? Why, I had one as recently as yesterday."

"You won't have any more," retorted Bill, still in the same hard tone. "You're going out of business, and I'm going to put you out."

"But this is news to me!"

"I'm beginning to realize to the full extent now what you've done," said Bill. "I'm just going to recount to you a few of my experiences. I don't know if you are aware of it, but at the present time there is a plague in London."

"Plague?"

"A plague of posters. The last great plague was followed by a fire. Unless this plague is stamped out by to-night, I'm going to start the biggest blaze in all history. I'm going to break my way into the advertising section of this horrible tobacco factory and put a candle in a tin of petrol, and I'll come away again when I see it burning nicely."

"If you ask my advice—"

"I don't; but let me give you some. You'd better close this office and make for some great open space where your superior length of leg may help you to get away from me, because I don't believe that I shall find the self-control to keep my hands off you much longer."

"Now, Bill, just tell me," replied Tim, "what is your actual complaint?"

"This," Bill responded. "London is saturated with my face."

"Well, if you only knew it," said the other, "you are the object of considerable envy. Not only did I win that competition, but I've had a caller who so much admires the decorative effect of your face in its natural color, everywhere around London, that she wants herself taken in the same way."

"She can be absolutely certain that she'll be taken in by you, but whether in the same way I should doubt. If you try that on anybody else, you'll be garroted."

"But she left me some photographs."

"She must be insane, then."

"I saw no signs of it. She was a most attractive girl."

"Well, never mind all that," said Bill. "You tell me what you're going to do about these posters."

He sat down heavily, put hat and cane on Tim's table, and scratched a place for his elbow among a lot of papers. The next moment his eye was attracted by a photograph. He slowly turned his head. Then he brought his eyes down to the picture

and sat as if transfixed. It was a photograph of Wanda.

Bill's hand moved out and grasped it. He lifted it and stared and stared again, and then he turned and held it out to Tim. His voice was cracked and straining toward falsetto.

"What's this?" he inquired.

"That? Oh, that's one she left. It was the best one."

"But this isn't the girl?"

"Oh, yes, it is."

"It is?"

"D'you know her, then?"

Bill sat more on the edge of his chair than ever. He had some difficulty in managing the apple of his throat.

"This girl came here and said she wanted to be on the billboards?"

"She went so far as to insist," said Tim, "that her place on them was beside you."

"Is that the honest truth?"

"Yes, she was ready to do almost anything. She was prepared, in fact, in the last resort, to be taken sitting at a table and asking idiotic questions about buying furniture on the installment system. No girl could make a greater sacrifice than that."

"What an extraordinary thing!" said Bill.

"Well, p'raps you think so, but it just shows I was right. Your poster has the punch. It gets across. That's fame. Here's a girl who wants to be at your right hand."

"What did you tell her, Tim?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I had to break it to her gently, but it was no use giving her a wrong idea. I've made a study of this question, and I know that to be a proper subject for a poster you have to be, somehow, a little irritating in appearance."

"What?"

"Consider all the characters most famous in advertisements. Without exception there is always something in the central figure which, besides attracting your attention, manages to annoy you, too. You must be smug and self-satisfied, or you must be unlike all other men and have no worries, or you must be cured of something and desire to tell the world the story of it, which is always boring. This girl was quite unsuitable. I was immensely sorry, but I had to tell her so. I kept this photograph in case I could fix anything. She's very beautiful, but, as I pointed out, beauty it-

self is no advertisement. I couldn't see that photographs of her could ever be annoying; and so she went away considerably disappointed. I was sorry. Still, one might manage something in a small way, though it assuredly could never be the hit your poster is."

Bill came a little closer.

"What do you mean, annoying?"

"Well, it's essential that you should have a forced grin, or should look insufferably good and wise. That's how advertisements establish character. You just looked maddeningly jovial."

"And I," said Bill, "am singularly annoying, then?"

"You look so in that photograph."

"Then I will see that I live up to it. So far as I'm concerned, I will lay myself out from now on to annoy you all I can. How did this girl get your address?"

"Well, she went to some trouble. She rang up these tobacco people and asked how they got the poster, and they gave her my name. The fact is, I'm not sure that I want to see her on a poster, anyhow. The girl had an unusual effect upon me. As a matter of fact, Bill, I believe I am in love with her!"

Bill nodded grimly.

"Oh, you are? That makes a very good beginning, then. I can annoy you intensely now. That girl is engaged to me."

Tim shot forward on his seat.

"What?" he cried.

"And that," said Bill, "is why she wants to be beside me. That girl must love me like anything!"

He rose and grabbed his hat and cane. The next moment he was hurrying down the stairs, and Tim was standing at his door and gaping after him. The astonished advertising agent spoke no word, and made no other move. He heard Bill call a taxi and drive off at speed; but he still stood there like a model. One might add that he looked distinctly waxy.

V

ONCE more Bill crossed the room toward Wanda. He had retained possession of his hat and cane, and with these he made gestures.

"Wanda!" he said.

To her it seemed the nicest way the name had been pronounced since he had been here last. A lot of people had cried "Wanda!" at her since he departed, but they had

done so in tones of anger or in the cracking voice of outraged astonishment.

She smiled at him.

"You wanted to be at my side in this trouble," Bill blurted. "Oh, you brick!"

"It's not going to be easy," she replied; "but he has kept one photograph. I might try somebody else, too."

"Wanda!" Bill said again.

She nodded.

"You've done your bootlace up, I see."

He looked down awkwardly, then came a little closer.

"Why did you ever say that silly thing?" he inquired. "It was a frightful shock. Why did you say you could break off with me without advice?"

"Well, so I could, couldn't I? I didn't say I meant to."

Bill looked steadfastly down at her.

"I've been to Tim. I don't know what to do. Shall I burn down those wretched tobacco works?"

"I've thought it over," Wanda said, "and I suggest this—the poster won't last very long. These people change their ideas

all the time, and this was just a competition, and it makes a splash. In three months' time they'll have another, and the 'Bill' poster will be forgotten. All we have to do until that time is just to be two stickers."

"Yes, yes!"

"We always said our honeymoon should be a trip around the world."

He nodded. He was too full for words.

"Well, I'm a little tired of living here. The family get very tiresome, and this seems the very time to go away."

"You mean it?" Bill exclaimed. "You really mean that honestly? How soon can you be ready?"

"Well, I shall need a day or two to buy some things," said Wanda; "but we might buy those in Paris. I don't know what a license costs, but, just in case you thought it was a good idea, I've been upstairs this morning, packing."

Bill threw his hat to one side of the room, and his gloves to the other. His cane clattered to the floor, and then, with his arms free at last, he took strong action.

THE GROUCHY OLD-TIMER

"THIS 'll be my last round-up," the young cowboy said,
 "For I'm plumb sick o' makin' the hard ground my bed!"
 But the boys, they just laughed, though Bill swore he was sick
 O' hard ridin' an' livin'—they knowed he would stick—
 An' he did, one year more—when he snorts out again,
 "The Range an' the Open—though I grants it makes men—
 It's a fine thing to think of, when you're far away,
 Or for writers to put in a story or play,
 But here's where I quit, for I'm goin' back East.
 Where a feller don't have to ride all night, at least,
 Round a herd o' fool longhorns allus ready to run:
 If a cowboy stops singin' the stampede's begun,
 When a missteppin' horse an' a prairie dog hole
 Presents to his Maker said cow-puncher's soul!"
 Yet, in spite of his words an' his vows that he'd change
 His manner o' livin', Bill stuck to the range—
 It was so every fall when the round-up was done:
 It was thus that he vowed: "I'm a son-of-a-gun
 If I don't chuck this job an' go back to the East
 Where a man has a few creature comforts, at least—
 With no rattlesnakes strikin', no wild bronses that buck!"
 But, did Bill ever chuck it? He did not—he stuck,
 Though years on years passed an' he never stopped fussin'
 Till he grew quite a character just fer his cussin'—
 For though bacon an' beans warn't his speshul delight,
 That Old Humbug loved even ridin' all night,
 Loved the round-ups, the plains, an' the great, watchin' sky;
 You could see his eyes shine as them steers trotted by—
 An' he stuck till his hair an' his whiskers was gray
 An' the West was fenced off an' the Range passed away!

Harry Kemp

The Amateur Criminals

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—HERE IS PROOF THAT TWO TYPES
OF WOMEN—MENTAL OR EMOTIONAL—CAN BE
ENIGMAS TO MERE MAN

By Gertrude Pahlow

"HE just sat there beside me, perfectly mum and glum," Jean was saying, "and there was nobody to introduce us, and it kept getting duller and duller. So, finally, I nipped the cigarette out of his mouth—just like that—and burned a nifty little hole right in the knee of his knickers. 'There!' I said. 'That'll show you there's somebody here besides the view!' and he looked at me so sad and surprised—like a dying flounder—that I burst three or four blood vessels laughing."

Her clear voice cut across the lovely peace of the September twilight, and smote distastefully on Clive Denby's bored and weary ear. He hated this silly, smart-Aleck patter that was Jean's "line." He hated girls, anyway.

But everybody else hailed it with enthusiasm. Admiring comments buzzed around the veranda.

"Oh, you red-hot baby!"

"Can't beat that Jean kid, can you?"

"How do you think up your stuff? You ought to be in Hollywood; you're wasted here."

"Pretty cute, I'll say. Were you lit up, Jean?" This from a youth in a zebra sweater, with large café-au-lait colored brogues propped up on the railing.

"Tighter than your new shoes. Never saw me as cute as that when I was sober, did you?" returned the girl saucily.

"Never saw you sober, did I?" countered the youth neatly.

A general shout of laughter applauded this interchange of wit, mostly that loud, unmodulated laughter which is the expression of callow masculine enjoyment. Clive shifted restlessly in his chair. He hated loud collegian laughter. He hated collegians. He hated men, anyway.

"Well, lambies, time to wag along home!" said Jean suddenly, jumping up. "I'll give somebody a lift; who wants to go with auntie?"

"I want to, auntie. Take me."

"No, Jean, you took him last time. Don't let him be a hog, Jean; take me."

"Now, Jean, you wouldn't let a grafter like that put anything over on *you*! Let him go the way he came, with Bill. I had to walk. Go on, Jean, take me."

"I won't take any of you," decided Jean, brushing away the clamoring group. "I'll take Clive, because he doesn't want me to. Come along, Clive darling."

Clive looked up, a little startled. Silly as she was, the girl was shrewd; she knew perfectly well that he didn't want to go with her. Everybody else did, and she chose him because he didn't. Well, that was life. He hated life, anyway.

Might as well go, though. Couldn't spend the night at the country club. He rose.

"All right, Jean; his master's voice," he acquiesced. "So long, everybody."

"So long! See you to-morrow! Don't forget that foursome, will you? And don't forget to brush your teeth and say your prayers!" The farewells drifted after them in a confused clamor. But as they climbed into the gay crimson roadster, one shrill voice detached itself from the medley, calling, "You better not let Jean drive! She's lit right now!"

"Better not let Jean drive, eh?" repeated Jean scornfully. "I'll show 'em if Jean can drive, lit or unlit. Hang on, Clive!"

She started the car and wheeled around the curving driveway with a magnificent sweep, waving her hand defiantly at the group on the veranda, and swinging into

the highway with a reckless verve that nearly carried off one of the gateposts. Some one shouted again at them warningly. Jean laughed over her shoulder, took the road as a diver takes the sea, and in a minute had left the club and its surroundings behind like a forgotten incident.

Most Berkshire ways are crooked ways, subject to sudden turns, to abrupt rises and equally abrupt plunges, and this one was no exception. It seldom continued for more than a minute in the same direction, horizontal or vertical. But up or down, crooked or straight, it seemed all the same to Jean. She looked at the landscape indifferently with darkly brilliant eyes, and took the turns with complete nonchalance, sometimes on three wheels and sometimes on two.

In spite of his world-weariness, Clive found himself holding his breath.

"Take it easy, Jean," he counseled, presently. "We've got plenty of time."

"Oh, no, we haven't!" returned Jean. "Art may be long, but life's short, and we're always twenty minutes late making any given point. We might be late for dinner, darling—we might be late for to-morrow—we must hurry—hurry—"

She laughed rather wildly as she swung the car suddenly around another breath-catching curve, and Clive stole an uneasy glance at her. He wondered if she really had been drinking. The flasks were frequently in evidence there at the club, and she did look very flushed and reckless.

Since his news that morning—the news that he had lost his position—his boredom and distaste for life had thickened until he had been buried in a dull, blinding isolation like a London fog; he hadn't noticed anything about her and the crowd, except that they seemed sillier than ever. Good heavens, what if she really weren't responsible, on this winding way, in this uncertain light? It was getting rougher and rougher, darker and darker, every minute.

And where were they, anyway? This was certainly not the road to their village. It was only a track, steeply sloping, deeply rutted, treacherous with loose stones. He looked from one side to the other, and saw nothing familiar. He looked ahead, and what he saw there made him gasp.

"Watch out, Jean!" he cried.

Jean, taking it in at the same moment, gasped, too. They were bowling swiftly down into a cup-shaped valley, along the

farther edge of which—just visible in the fading light—ran a little river. Directly beyond it the mountain loomed up like a perpendicular wall; if they managed to cross the narrow, rickety bridge in safety—a feat in itself at this speed—they must inevitably be dashed to pieces against the cliff; and they were going so fast that their fate fairly flung itself upon them. Clive had one of those bird's-eye views of his past that are supposed to precede sudden death.

"Hold your breath, Clive!" said Jean in a tense undertone. "We're due for a flight."

She pressed hard on the brake, twisted hard on the wheel; the car leaped and swerved; and in a second they were soaring over the embankment at the side of the road, the car turning, they turning with it, and the dark bottom of the valley rushing up to meet them.

Clive had a swift impression that there was nothing dull about driving with Jean. He did not have to ascertain whether he was bored or not.

II

HE lifted himself cautiously, studying himself with an impersonal, reporterlike interest to see if he were all there. There were no bones broken, he was quite sure, because nearly all of him responded readily to the roll call. His head ached, and he felt rather battered and considerably surprised, but otherwise not at all like a man who has shaken hands with the angel of death.

He looked up over the precipice over which they had shot, and was astonished and disappointed to discover that it was only a low, grassy bank; he had thought it a perfect alp. Taking the flight had undoubtedly saved their lives; the little bridge was so narrow and so rickety that it would have been impossible of safe passage under the conditions, and the mountain towered unescapably close beyond it. Lucky thing for them that Jean had a quick mind and a strong wrist. Surprising that such a little flibbertigibbet should show so much poise and resolution.

This brought him to the thought of Jean, and he suddenly wondered where she was. He peered all about him in the gloom, and could see nothing of her. He had fallen clear of the car, which lay on its side a little way from him, the broken glass of its windshield glinting faintly in the dim light. A

sharp alarm stabbed him. If she were under it, all must be over with her.

"Jean!" he called anxiously. "Where are you?"

"I was wondering—when you'd begin—to ask that," returned a muffled voice beneath him. "Get up—and I'll show you. You're sitting on me."

Clive scrambled to his feet, and, sure enough, there where he had been sitting was Jean. He had been aware of a sort of bumpiness, but had put it down to the general novelty of the situation. She had landed in a tumbled heap, her frock a pale blur on the ground, her legs and arms intricately involved beneath her; and as he looked at her she turned her face and met his anxious look with a breathless, gasping laugh.

"I'm all right," she panted. "Just had the breath—knocked out of me. Some aviators—what?"

Clive warmed with admiration as he leaned to help her up; silly or not, she was a good sport. She gave him her hands, and tried to respond to his pull with a spring. But halfway up she sank back, with a little suppressed "Oh!" of pain.

"What is it?" asked Clive, alarmed. "Anything broken?"

"I don't think so—just a little impaired," she gasped. "It's my ankle—sprained, I suppose. Can't complain about that. Lucky not to have my—bloomin' head—bashed in."

"You're a peach of a sport, Jean. Let's have a look at it."

She untwisted herself, suppressing another cry of anguish as she did so, and with her hands, straightened the damaged leg out before her on the ground. Clive, kneeling, took off her shoe and touched her ankle with his sensitive, musicianly fingers. Even through the stocking a lump was rising palpably. He felt her wince as he touched it.

"It's sprained, all right," he said. "Gosh, what hard luck! Will you wait here, while I go for help?"

"There's not likely to be much help loose around this neck of the woods. The Lord will have to help those who help themselves. Just needs a good, tight bandage, anyway. Catch hold of this sock, will you?"

She had turned down the top of her stocking and peeled it halfway off, and now abandoned it to him for the difficult operation of getting it over the helpless foot.

He worked as quickly and gently as he could, but even so he saw her hands clench. When she spoke, however, her voice was under perfect control.

"Thanks. There's a first-aid kit in the car, left side pocket—or there was before the flight. Bandage in it. Watch out for broken glass."

After some fumbling in the prostrate car, Clive succeeded in locating the pocket, and found the kit and an electric torch still safely buttoned inside. When he came back with them to Jean, she had lifted the injured foot across the other knee, so that it was within the sphere of her own ministrations; and unrolling the bandage at her direction, he watched her bind it deftly under the arched instep and over the egg-shaped lump. Her capability surprised him. He noticed her hands; slender, sensitive, and strong, they were—the kind of hands that look as if anything they did would be well done. He wondered why he had never noticed them before—too bored by her silly gabble, probably.

When she had finished the bandaging, he helped her coax the stocking on again over the enlarged area, and put the shoe—which was unnegotiable—into his pocket.

"Can you stand, do you think?" he asked her.

"I'm sure I can; I know the tricks of this pin now. Give me a hand—a long pull, a strong pull—there!"

Balancing on her well foot, she came up to him like a bird; and he steadied her with an arm around her shoulders, and looked at her admiringly.

"You're magnificent, Jean," he said earnestly. "You're the pluckiest girl I ever saw. Now, then, where do we go from here?"

They looked around. It seemed to be one of those questions to which echo returns the only available answer. The meadow in which they had landed was the very bottom of the cup of hills, its only link with the outer world the lonely road from which they had soared. One glance at the car, supine and shattered among the clover, was enough to eliminate it from any list of possibilities. No light twinkled anywhere from the darkening clefts between the mountains, and there was no sound but the bicker of the little river. The air was moist and misty, presaging rain. It was an outlook discouraging enough to daunt Pollyanna herself.

"Great Caesar!" exclaimed Clive. "Where do we go? Can't even a signpost live in this climate?"

"It looks," said Jean, "as if any advice we got around here would have to be given by ourselves. You offer the first hunch."

"We might find a telephone, and get a car to come for us. Any notion where we are?"

"Not a glimmer. We left our road long ago, when I got an inspiration to do a little exploring. I know we're at the back of beyond. I don't suppose there's a telephone for miles."

"Well, you certainly can't walk miles to hunt one. In fact, I don't see how you can walk at all. I suppose the best thing to do is to sit on the ruins, like Hannibal, and wait for your family to miss you."

"Golly, we'd have some wait! I haven't any family but dad, and he stays in town all the middle of the week. Even the cook won't miss me, because half the time when I go over to the club I stay all night with one of the girls. What about you?"

"Oh, nobody'd miss me if I jumped off; I'm just boarding at the inn. Rescue parties are out of the question, then. What next?"

Jean peered about in the thickening gloom.

"Way over on the other side of the meadow, on the edge of that woods, is a house," she said. "It's deserted—I should say, offhand, because it's ready to cave in. But it has a roof and a door, and I suppose lots of people would think it was paradise enough. I could hop that far all right, and you could go farther and fare better."

"And leave you flat? What do you take me for?"

"For a wise lad. I got you into this; now I'm going to help you move out. Get me over there, do, and then toddle along."

"Like ducks I will! I may be a blemish on the earth's surface, but I won't go off and leave a one-legged girl alone with a bunch of mountains. If that's the only refuge, let's turn to it while the turning's good. The shades of night are falling."

It was, indeed, getting darker every second. The clouded sunset-light had nearly all gone, and the sky was heavy with the approaching rain. In the thick gloom the noise of the little river, and the wail of the wind through the pine tops sounded eerie and sinister. The girl shivered involuntarily, and Clive, who was about to shiver

himself, had to make a strong effort to sound hearty and nonchalant.

"All right; forward the Light Brigade!" he said. "Lean as much as you can on me, Jean, and I'll steer around the pitfalls."

"I'm with you. *Aux armes, citoyens!*" returned Jean, and began to hop forward valiantly.

The house looked even darker and more cheerless close at hand than it had done from the other side of the meadow. It had that peculiar air of desolation that only the deserted dwelling places of humankind acquire; apparently it had not been long abandoned, for the door and windows retained their integrity, and a vine clambered shaggily over the little portico; but the dark eyeholes, the loose-hanging shutters, the rank grass growing up to the doorstep, lent it, in the half light, a dour aspect that was forbidding in the extreme.

Clive felt the girl shiver again inside his sustaining arm, and an answering tremor quivered through his own nerves. Unconsciously they both slackened their already halting pace, and looked uneasily at their refuge.

As they did so, there rose within it, and floated uncannily out to their ears, a faint, whimpering cry.

They both started as if they had been shot. The girl, unsteady on her one foot, clutched at Clive to keep her balance. He tightened his arm around her, and they stared pallidly at one another.

"Is it—haunted?" whispered Jean. In that lonesome spot and ghostly light the thing seemed more than possible.

"I don't believe so. I think there's something alive in it. I'm going to see."

"Oh, don't! It might—get you. Don't go in—don't, Clive!"

"Well, I'll investigate from outside first. Perhaps we can see it."

"Wherever you go, I'm going with you." She clung determinedly to his arm.

"All right; it can't do more than eat us. Here goes."

They peered into one after another of the front windows, but the coating of dust and cobwebs was too thick, and the darkness within too complete, to reveal anything. Then they went on around the house, past a windowless L that seemed mostly woodshed, to the rear. Here they were actually in the woods; twigs rattled, there were uneasy whisperings and stealthy sighings; it was easier to imagine unseen

presences than not to. A loose shutter creaked suddenly, and they clutched each other. But they could detect neither sound nor movement inside the house, and returned to the front no wiser than before.

As they stood again before the forbidding doorstone, Clive felt in his pocket for a handkerchief with which to wipe the dews of nervousness from his brow, and discovered the electric torch there.

"Oh, here's your flash light!" he said. "That simplifies things; now we can see what's doing. I'm going in; will you wait here for me?"

"No, if you go in, I go," answered Jean. "But oh, Clive, if we never come out—I wish I hadn't been such a fool! If I had it to do over again—"

Clive patted her arm reassuringly, pressed the button of the torch, and turned the door handle. The door opened unresistingly. He entered, and helped her up the low step. The little tunnel of light bored through the thick darkness, disclosing a wavy floor, a few nondescript pieces of furniture, and a dim doorway or two beyond, nothing more. But as they crossed the threshold the faint whimper sounded again, this time unmistakably near them, and gooseflesh crept over them in a crinkling wave.

However, they had come too far now to turn back. They kept valiantly on into the room which seemed to occupy most of the ground floor, and stopped for a systematic survey. The furniture consisted only of battered relics that the departing owners had evidently not thought worth carrying away; but, to their surprise, dust and cobweb played no such part in the interior decoration as the outside had promised; the room had been lately swept, and there was firewood piled by the hearth. Some one had certainly entered this desolate place a very little time ago. Clive turned the light all about. The corners stood empty, and the doorways to the dark hinterlands yawned lifeless and forbidding. Was it a ghost, after all?

Suddenly Jean clutched his arm. "Look there!" she whispered.

Following her pointing finger, he looked underneath the rickety table, and there—the most incongruous object this deserted and primitive abode could have harbored—lay one of those luxuriously lined, cushioned and ventilated baskets that dogs of the *haut ton* use to travel illegally and un-

observed. The lid was propped part way open, and as Jean hobbled eagerly forward, pulling Clive with her, the ray of light fell into the aperture.

Inside was a sleeping baby.

III

THE infant stirred, gave another little whimper, and settled down to deeper sleep. Clive stared at it in paralyzed amazement. Of all the evidences of human tenancy one could have thought to find in this spidery stronghold of desolation, a clean, brand-new thing like a baby was the last. He thought the fall must have affected either his eyes or his brain.

"Holy mackerel!" he exclaimed. "Do you see it, too? Is it really there?"

"Sh!" she commanded in an urgent whisper. "Don't wake him!"

Surprised by the warmth of her tone, and suddenly missing the pressure of her shoulder against his, he turned the flash light inquiringly on her. She had dropped to her knees beside the basket, and was gazing at its small occupant in a starry-eyed absorption that made him wonder more than ever if he were quite right in his mind.

He had heard that there were women who took this sort of fervent interest in babies, though having observed no occasion for it himself, he had hardly believed in it; but to associate it with Jean, the wild, the uncontrolled, the silly life-of-the-party—why, that was beyond belief! Yet there she was, kneeling, adoring, her cheeks flushed and her lips curved in a smile of tender delight.

He stared at her. She was always pretty in an exotic, orchidlike fashion that expressed itself in wild extremes of make-up and dress. Now she was suddenly lovely, grown in an instant from a bizarre child to a beautiful woman. It was incredible—like a miracle, or some startling phenomenon of nature.

She felt his eyes upon her, and looked up, but without self-consciousness or even consciousness of him.

"Isn't he a darling!" she murmured. "He's the loveliest baby I ever saw."

"Seems healthy. Do you really like him such a lot, Jean?"

"Oh, I love him!" Her starry eyes returned to the small pink creature in the basket. "Look at his chin, Clive—there's a dimple in it. And look—do look at that little fat fist!"

Clive tried to look, but found his attention riveted to the marvel of the transformed Jean. For the first time, stirred by curiosity, he found her interesting. He consciously wanted to enter into conversation with her. Since the baby seemed to be the only topic of which she was aware, he continued it.

"How d'you suppose it got here, Jean? Who ever heard of bootlegging a baby to a jumping-off place like this?"

"I wonder! Probably there's a letter pinned to him; there always is to babies in baskets. Let's look." She began—entirely without fear, which seemed to Clive very remarkable—to delve among the pillows and billows of the baby's housing, and soon triumphantly brought up an envelope attached to the blanket. "Let's go over there to read it, so the light won't wake him," she added. "I suppose it's for us; if he's a foundling, we're certainly the foundlers."

Clive helped her up, and going to the rickety sofa which the flash light located in a corner, they sat down, side by side, and read the letter.

DEAR MISS G.:

I hope everything will go all right. The chauffeur has instructions to make things as comfortable as possible for you. The nurse Mrs. L. is dismissing, the one who arranged the affair for me, put paregoric in the baby's milk so he would be sure to sleep until you came. There is no danger of anything passing the house; I picked it because it is the loneliest spot in the county. I am told the child is healthy and doesn't require any special attention. The nurse packed up twenty-four hours' rations for him; I suppose you will know when to feed him and all that.

Will come for you to-morrow A.M. as arranged.

Yours in haste,

G. F. L.

This epistle, completely obscure to Clive, appeared to flood the girl's consciousness with light. She dropped it into her lap, and turned very bright eyes upon him.

"Well!" she said, in a suppressed, intense voice. "That explains it!"

"It's as clear as mud to me. Who is this infant—the Lost Dauphin?"

"Don't you *know*? Look at those initials, G. F. L. It's the George Langham baby!"

Fragments of half remembered newspaper headlines, and half heard club gossip began to take shape in Clive's consciousness. He looked at Jean in astonishment.

"What! Not the Millionaire Kid?"

"Yes, the Millionaire Kid. His mother was Evelyn Brooks; she and I were at

school together. She's taken the Gables at Torrington for the summer. Well, I *thought* I recognized something about him, the sweet thing! It's Evelyn's nose."

"But what do you figure he's doing here?"

"Why, I think that horrid Langham's kidnaping him. The courts gave him to Evelyn, but there's something unsettled about it; and I suppose George Langham thinks if he gets him now he'll be able to keep him. He's a brute; he's treated Evelyn frightfully; and all he wants is the poor mite's million. Imagine it—*doping* the precious thing, and leaving him here in the wilderness for a perfectly strange nurse to pick up! Why, he might have been devoured by mice, like old Whosis at Bingen. I never *heard* of anything so inhuman!"

Clive, to whom the letter had seemed to show a commendable interest in the infant's welfare, was a little nonplused. He passed on to the next point. "This nurse person—do you take it she's imminent?"

The girl started. "Oh, perhaps she is! What time is it?"

He flashed the light on his watch. "Almost half past seven."

"Then she's almost here. She probably took the afternoon train from New York, and that's due at Winfield at seven ten. Good gracious, we haven't any time to waste!"

"What can we do? She can't miss the house, because it's the only one, and the chauffeur's been here before, anyway. No use going out to meet her."

"Meet her! I should hope not! You don't suppose I'm going to let her *have* this baby, do you?"

Clive stared at her. "You're not! Why not?"

Her dark eyes flashed indignation at him. "What a question! Do you think I'd let a brute like that, that abandons his wife and gives his child *paregoric*, steal a poor, little, defenseless baby away from its *mother*? I'm *surprised* at you, Clive!"

Clive was surprised, too, but not at himself. "Wh-what do you mean to do, then?" he asked feebly.

"I mean to hide him until that nurse woman gets out of the way, and then trot him back to Evelyn as fast as I possibly can, of course."

"But that'll mean staying here all night. We'd have enough of a job at best to get away, with a smashed car and a sprained

ankle; I don't see how we could do it at all if we tried to haul a baby."

"Very well, then we'll *stay* here. We'd be more gnawed by remorse if we forsook that poor mite than we could possibly be by mice if we stuck to him. That is," she added, with a sudden withdrawal of the warmth from her voice, "*I'll* stay. I don't want to make any demands on you, of course. You're free to go whenever you please."

Oddly enough, the alteration in her voice affected Clive unpleasantly. It was as if he had stood looking into a room bright with firelight and warm with comradeship, and some one had suddenly shut the door and left him outside in the cold. He wanted to get back into the aura of warmth and friendliness.

"Oh, I don't want to go!" he said hastily. "If you stay, I do. I am not going to abandon a sprained lady to the mice, any more than you are a paregoricked baby. I'll fight any mouse that tries to put me out."

She flashed a sudden, vivid smile at him. "Good boy, Clive!" she approved. "Then let's dig in quick; there's no time to spare. I'll take the baby, and you hold the light and give me a little moral support under the elbow."

Hobbling to the basket, she closed it, with a cooing murmur of apology to its sleeping occupant, and took it up in her arms. Clive projected his slender searchlight across the dark floor, and, his arm around her again, helped her navigate through the doorway with her burden. They left the door latched, as they had found it, and stood outside, looking about them.

It was darker than ever; night had come down now in good earnest, and a thin drizzle had begun to fall. They seemed to be so infolded in darkness that further concealment was useless, and, indeed, impossible. But Jean, whose ears were as quick as her decisions, gave a start, and hugged the basket closer.

"Listen!" she said. "There's a car coming. Quick—get around behind the house before they see our light!"

She was right; in the distance, and coming steadily nearer, was the *zoom* of a powerful motor; and as soon as they had turned the corner of the house its lights came in sight, boring a white tunnel through the misty blackness.

"Oh, hurry!" she whispered, and plunged toward the shelter of the woods.

Clive's heart was in his mouth; the wood was untrodden, the underbrush thick, and the trees close set; the footing would be precarious enough at best in the dark, and with a lame girl and a bulky burden to negotiate, further handicapped as they were by the need of haste, it was perilous. And if she fell into a woodchuck hole, and if the baby cried, and if the pursuers discovered them, what kind of a mess would they be in then?

And how should they get out of it? She seemed to think it a matter of questionable ethics for a father to kidnap his own child; what was the position of a couple of total strangers attempting the same feat? He felt stiff with uneasiness and apprehension. When a twig snapped he jumped like a rabbit.

Jean, however, forged unsteadily ahead without any sign of misgiving, and, aided by the power that protects the reckless and single minded, reached her chosen goal without mishap. As soon as they were well shrouded in foliage, she set the basket gently on the ground, and motioned Clive to put out the light. They stood waiting. Here, under the trees, it was dry, cold, and still. Clive kept an arm about the girl's shoulders, and noticed her grow tense with excitement.

The car lurched slowly and cautiously down the rocky, rutty road, stopping just before it reached the bridge. Two figures, a man and a woman's, emerged from it, and, with the aid of a flash light, began picking their way gingerly across the damp meadow. As they approached, the watchers could hear them exchanging disjointed remarks.

"Mind that hole, miss; li'ble to take a fall."

"What an *awful* place! Not a living thing anywhere!"

"He picked it for that, 'cause it's lonesome. Watch out for them low spots, they're wet."

"My land, I never *saw* such a place. Did you bring blankets?"

"Sure, blankets an' food an' the kid's duffel. Everything but the kitchen stove, an' that's there already."

"Well, it's an awful place. I never *saw*—"

The door opened and closed, and there was silence once more.

Jean clutched Clive's arm. "Now they're looking for the baby," she whispered. "Now they can't find him. Now they're wondering. Now they're worried. Now they're mad. Now they're—coming. *Duck!*"

She crouched down into the underbrush, pulling Clive with her, and they huddled together, tense and motionless. The door closed with a bang, and around the house came the glimmer of the flash light, accompanied by acrimonious voices.

"I tell you Mr. Langham changed his mind, that's all. It's *gotta* be him; nobody else knew the kid was here."

"Well, I call it a nice performance! Get me way out to this awful place—night like this—and leave me in the lurch—and my feet are wet already—what in the world's the use of poking around there? You don't think he threw the baby on the woodpile, do you?"

"Well, I gotta report to him in the morning, ain't I? S'pose he *didn't* take the kid, I gotta be able to say I looked everywhere, ain't I? Don't be foolish."

"Foolish yourself. Anybody can see there's nothing here. For goodness' sake get me out of this awful place before I'm soaked to the skin."

"I'm gonna look good, now I'm here. He ain't in the house nor the woodshed, that's sure. How about that rock? No, nothin' there. Let's have a look at these here woods." The light flashed slowly and penetratingly among the foliage, resting so long on the trees behind which the amateur kidnapers were hiding that Clive felt Jean's shiver joined to his own. "No, nothin' there," said the voice at last. "No signs o' life anywhere."

"Well, I hope you're satisfied. Now, for Heaven's sake, let's get away! I suppose I've got to spend the night in that dump of a village."

"Sure you gotta. We gotta go with him in the mornin', same as we agreed, even if he did change his mind about to-night. I s'pose I'd oughta collect that junk in the house."

"Not much! Your precious Langham can get it himself if he wants it. You get me out of this, do you hear? I don't stay another minute in this awful place!"

The grumbling voices and wavering flash light receded around the corner of the house, and moved across the swampy meadow to the car; and in a minute the

buzz of the motor rose, increased, and dwindled away in the distance.

The amateur kidnapers straightened up with relief. Even Clive was aware of a certain satisfaction at this initial success in crime, and Jean was exuberant.

"Hallelujah!" she cried. "I never thought I'd live to thank Heaven for paregoric, but I do. Jolly good thing our car was in the ditch, too, or they'd have seen it. Something rather monotonous about that nurse's conversational style, don't you think? I'll never let her have a hand in educating this blessed baby."

"She routed easy, anyhow. Great Scott, I thought they had us, at first! Well, the field's ours—and the house, too. Let's go inside."

They gathered up the baby and made their way out of the woods. Oddly enough, the house had now lost all its sinister aspect; having repelled a hostile invasion, it seemed friendly and welcoming to them. They entered it briskly, like people returning to a pleasant place.

"Now," said Jean, depositing the basketed baby on the floor, "let's get to work and plant a rose on the brow of chaos. I feel ready for a little home life, after all this excitement. Give me that flash light, will you, and we'll see what we've got to build on?"

The resources of the room revealed themselves as a Franklin stove, a table, three rickety chairs, the broken sofa, and two hampers. Under Jean's competent generalship, these component parts began speedily to weld themselves into a unit of surprising comfort. She directed Clive to build a fire, to draw the table and the two more able-bodied chairs before it, and to form a boundary to the area of warmth and light with the sofa.

Then she explored the hampers; one was devoted to the infant's plenishment, the other to adult needs, and both were lavishly provided. She unpacked with exclamations of satisfaction, and spread out the food appetizingly. Then she disposed the paper napkins at the appointed places, lighted the candles, affixed them to the table with blobs of melted wax, and opened the thermos bottle of coffee. When Clive returned from the kitchen, whither she had sent him in search of water, she had produced an effect of warmth, brightness, and hospitality at which the young man blinked in amazement.

"By Jupiter, Jean, you're a wizard!" he exclaimed, standing in the doorway with a water pail in his hand. "How in the world did you do it?"

"Any place that has fire and food in it looks good to a hungry man," said Jean off-handedly, though she sparkled with satisfaction. "Light, stranger; draw up, and plunge in!"

Clive needed no urging; neither, it seemed, did Jean; and companionably established before the hearth, they attacked the supper with enthusiasm. The fire snapped and crackled, the coffee steamed, the bacon, which they had impaled on sticks and cooked in the flames, sent up to heaven the most delicious aroma known to the nostrils of hungry man. Outside, the drizzle had set in to a steady downpour, and the beat of the rain on the roof added the finishing touch of coziness to the firelit seclusion.

Clive found himself glowing with a sense of well-being to which he had long been a stranger. He had forgotten his boredom, his distaste for life, his weariness of his fellow men, his stupid job that he had lost through negligence; to his own astonishment, he felt a tingle of youth and buoyancy running through his veins.

"I haven't had such a good meal since I was nine and a half," he said. "You're a topping hostess, Jean. I'm having a peach of a time."

"I'm so glad you're enjoying it," returned Jean amiably. "I didn't have as good luck with my bread as usual, on account of the baby falling into the pan while I was mixing it, but I think you'll find the hard-boiled eggs well done."

Clive looked at her intently. In these simple, homely surroundings her look of exoticism had vanished; the bright carmine of her lips—which, like most of the girls in her set, she was in the habit of publicly renewing about once in every ten minutes—had faded to a natural deep rose color; her dark eyes no longer shone extravagantly bright, and her sophisticated little frock had lost its bandbox immaculateness. Seated by the fire, cooking bacon, pouring coffee, she looked so normal and wholesome that only her prettiness marked her for the same girl—and that, too, was changed and softened. He could not take his eyes from her.

"You know, Jean," he said, "you've got me buffaloed. I can't make you out.

You're no more like what you were two or three hours ago than I'm like the Statue of Liberty. I used to think—"

"I know what you used to think." She took up his hesitation unhesitatingly, looking at him as straight as he at her. "You used to loathe me. You loathed me because you thought I was a fool; and you thought I was a fool because I *was* one. You were perfectly right."

"You weren't a fool, Jean, but you certainly acted like one. Why?"

"I have to, Clive. It's the only way I can stand living the fool's life I have to live."

"What! Aren't you satisfied with your life? I thought you ate it up. You're always the very center of it."

"I hate it!" she burst out with sudden intensity. "I hate it worse even than you do. I've always hated it. I want to be a nurse, Clive. I'd be a good nurse, I'm born for it. But my dad won't let me. His idea is for me to stay and embellish the home, and associate with my 'equals' and get my name in the society column."

"He's a self-made man, dad is; he worked hard for his money, and now he wants to get the worth of it in showing off. He can't see that I'm made of the same stuff he is, and want to be a self-made woman! And I'm not of age, so I have to give in. But, if I'm going to live a fool's life, I'll do it right; I'll be the foolishlest fool there. That's my way."

Clive thought back over his brief acquaintance with her. This accounted for the reckless pace, and for the odd impression of insincerity he had had from her; she wasn't really living that wild silliness at all. He observed her with a new interest and understanding.

"You poor kid," he commented. "That seems an awful shame. Do you spend *all* your time masquerading? Don't you do anything you really like?"

She brightened with one of her swift changes. "Oh, yes, I do sometimes. When we're in town, I play hooky twice a week and work at the nursery. You know our *alumnae* maintain a home for homeless children, a dozen or so at a time, and there's lots to do for them. Often they're ill or undernourished, poor mites, and we build them up and get them ready for adoption. I work with the nurses. The babies are the *darlingest* things—I hate it when we find homes for them; but luckily

there are always lots more. Well, that's enough about me. What about you? Do you have fun?"

Clive relapsed suddenly from the warm, live feeling with which his sympathy for Jean had inspired him, toward the dull depression which had been his prevailing mood for some time past.

"No," he said. "I don't have anything. I used to have music, but my family fought that until they knocked all the fun out of it, and after that there didn't seem to be much left. I'm pretty much of an alley cat; no kin except an uncle, and he a flop; no job except—well, in fact, *no* job; and no enthusiasm about anything."

Jean knitted her brows.

"There's something wrong about that. Why haven't you a job? *You* aren't one of these piffing idle rich, are you? I hope not."

"Oh, no, I have to work for my living. I've been bond broking for one of my father's friends since I got out of college. But I was so bored with it, and did it so rottenly, that I've been getting warnings for the last six months; and to-day I got word from the boss that, since I didn't show any improvement, I could consider myself fired at the end of my vacation. So now I'm a complete, teetotal blank."

"But why the utter lack of enthusiasm? Isn't there anything you like to do?"

"Nothing but music, and I can't get a living out of that. My uncle would send me around the world; spacious traveling is his idea of a 'gentleman's occupation,' but after what he did to my music, I wouldn't take a ticket to heaven from him. And now I'm twenty-six, and too old to take up new interests; I expect I'll just stagger along killing time somehow, until I check out."

She considered him frowningly.

"You ought not to be talking like that. You're worse than I am. I'm not world-weary, I'm only peeved. *Everybody* ought to be interested in *something*. I believe you're only unawakened."

She paused a moment, pondering, and had just opened her lips to offer further counsel, when there came a sudden—and, to Clive, a startling interruption. From the luxurious dog basket, behind them in the shadow, there rose a still, small squeak which swelled rapidly into a cry, and then, with a staggering swiftness and volume, into a full-fledged roar. Clive had forgot-

ten the baby; he jumped in genuine alarm, which gave way to marked disapproval as he realized the source of the disturbance.

"I'm not likely to stay unawakened long," he commented, "with that young alarm clock around! What does he carry inside him, a steam siren?"

But Jean had no ears for him. She had risen instantly from her chair, wincing with disregarded pain as she did so, and hobbled to the basket. Now, kneeling in absorbed attention, she gathered the baby into her arms, and cooed to it softly, with sounds which made, as Clive could not help noting, rudimentary music of an oddly soothing quality.

"*Precious* darling, don't cry—there, there, never mind, sweet, everything's all right—there, there, *don't* cry, honey—there, there."

The infant seemed to appreciate the intent of this litany, for in a moment the roar subsided, and a subdued whimper took its place. Jean looked up with shining eyes of pride.

"Isn't he a darling?" she said. "If he weren't almost starved he wouldn't cry at all. Hurry and get a bottle out, Clive, and find a pan, and fill it half up with water, and set the bottle in it, in the edge of the fire, until the chill's off. You'll be quick, won't you? He's *so* hungry!"

Clive obeyed her perforce, for she seemed to take it for granted that he was as absorbed in the infant's welfare as she. But he was conscious of a dull discontent as he trudged about doing her bidding. They had been having such a delightful time talking about him, grumbled his subconscious mind resentfully—and now she wasn't even aware of his existence any more.

When the bottle was warmed and given to the baby, peace settled on the room again. Jean sat on the rickety sofa, holding the baby, who in turn held the bottle. He appreciated his repast with tremendous gurglings and smackings; she appreciated him with an adoring, down-bent look, and Clive, tilting back in the loose-jointed armchair as he smoked, appreciated her with half-unwilling warmth. Her unconscious face was wistful and sweet, the lines of her supple figure were instinct with tenderness; in the dimming firelight, with her colors more soft and blurred, and her orchid aspect all gone, she looked like a girl one could dream about.

It was a long time since he had been

sentimental about anybody, but certainly the forgotten mood was stirring in him now. He remembered his college days, how he would sing love songs in a muted voice, *molto appassionato*, and how the girls' eyes would dwell meltingly upon him, and how very easy it was to kiss them afterward. Half unconsciously he began humming in his throaty, appealing barytone:

Last night I was dreaming—of thee, love, was dreaming;
I dreamed that I held thee once more to—oo my breast,
While thy soft, silken tresses, and tender caresses—

He broke off abruptly; he hadn't meant to start with such drastic measures. He turned away his head, self-consciously aware that his face was reddening. But before he had time to capture a less explicit ditty, Jean spoke urgently, "Oh, do go on!"

Clive was aware of a pang of disappointment. He had begun to harbor a decided approval of Jean; even at her silliest, she had been crisp and self-sustaining, and after the experiences of to-night, he had felt that she was a girl of character. And now she must join the soppy ranks of the easy melters! He kept his eyes averted in a sort of embarrassment.

"Don't stop!" she urged. "Can't you see he loves it? He's even stopped taking his bottle!"

He looked again at her, taken aback. She was gazing raptly at the baby, who, indubitably gurgling more slowly, had fixed round eyes on the *minnesinger*. Clive chuckled, but with an undercurrent of chagrin; his spell still worked, indeed, but not as he had expected.

"Do you think that song quite suitable?" he asked ironically.

"Why not? He likes it—don't you, sweetness? Go on, do! Hark, darling—pitty music!"

So Clive went on with the tresses and caresses, and the baby gazed at him round-eyed, while Jean gazed at the baby. He felt another sort of disappointment, now; so far from melting to him, she was aware of him only as entertainment to the child. But he finished the song, and the baby finished the bottle, and Jean greeted the end of both with approval.

"He loves music," she commented. "Isn't he adorable?"

"Do you?" questioned Clive.

"Do I what?" she asked, coming back

from the baby with an effort. "Oh—love music? Yes, of course. I see exactly what he likes about your voice; it's that vibrant, rather tremolo quality. He's probably never heard anything like it before. Sing again, won't you?"

Clive stiffened; this was being butchered to make a Roman holiday. "I can't," he answered coldly.

"Then I will," said Jean. "Of course, it's very subversive to sing him to sleep, but all his habits are knocked sky high by this outrageous performance, and we must get him through it the best we can. Take this bottle away, will you? So I can settle him down comfy."

"What! Do you mean to say he just gets up and feeds his face and calls it a day and goes to sleep again—just like that?"

"He ought not to be up at all at this time of night; this bottle was due long ago. He should sleep, at his age, from six at night to six in the morning—and here's the poor mite wide-awake at nearly nine!"

"Not a fit way to treat a dog, I should say," commented Clive.

"No, is it?" returned Jean warmly. "You see why we have to rescue him from those brutes. Come, sweet, put little head on Jean's shoulder."

She cuddled the baby into the hollow of her arm, and, bending her head over him, began softly to sing Brahms's "Sandmännchen." Her singing voice was wholly devoid of the crisp staccato quality with which she spoke; it was low and warm, and had a lovely tenderness which, Clive knew, would never have been revealed to him but for the presence of the baby.

As she sang she emphasized the lilting measure, not with any movement of her body, but with some more subtle beat of the mind, so that the song seemed to swing like the rocking of a cradle. Clive, sitting back in the shadows, listened at first with pure pleasure, then with a stabbing pain. His mother used to sing that song exquisitely; it was from her that he drew his love of music. He had almost forgotten, these last years, how it hurt when she died.

"*Schlafe du, mein Kindelein!*" crooned Jean; and then added softly: "Look! He is asleep!"

Clive crossed to her side, and stood looking down at the little round flaxen head and the shining brown one. He would not have thought it possible, in his world-weary mood of the afternoon, that by night he

could be so stirred by so elemental a picture—firelight, a sleeping child, a cherishing woman; but now there was actually a lump in his sophisticated throat.

"I must settle him down while he's asleep," said Jean in a low voice. "And I think I'd better settle myself, too. I'm not used to aviating."

"Are you suffering much?" asked Clive anxiously.

"Oh, no; but this pin does ache something ferocious. I see they've got that other room ready for the nurse, and I think the babe and I will dig in there right away."

Clive looked around uncertainly, not quite sure what the proprieties of such a situation demanded. Besides the living room and the bedroom adjoining, the ground floor boasted only the damp, mildewed kitchen. There was a loft, reached by a rickety stair, but those portions of it visible through the broken flooring did not commend it for human habitation.

"I suppose I'd better park in the woodshed," he suggested. "The ground's a trifle damp."

"Bosh!" returned Jean, with her admirable simplicity. "The place for you is this sofa. You can roll up in one of the blankets, and if you take a good grip on these sticking-out springs, you won't slip off the horsehair. I do hope you get some sleep; you must feel pretty banged-up yourself."

"Oh, I'm all right. But you, Jean—I want to tell you what a wonder I think you are. To go through a performance like this, suffering as you must be suffering, with never a whimper—"

"Pish tush, I have nothing to whimper about; I brought it all on myself. You're the creditable one, not to make any fuss. I appreciate it, too. Most men would have knocked my block off for less than what I've brought on you."

The conversation had been conducted in murmurs, on account of the sleeping child, and unconsciously Clive had been leaning lower and lower. His head was now almost on a level with hers, and as she looked up to voice her appreciation, he became acutely aware of a proximity full of danger to those precarious proprieties that he was determined to respect. He dropped his eyes to the baby, but something of the thought he was trying to conceal must have burned through their lids, for she suddenly gave him a very warm and kindly smile.

"I know what *you* want!" she said. "You want to kiss the baby good night. So do I, awfully. Of course, it's unsanitary, but it is hard to resist, isn't it?"

Clive made a noncommittal murmur. He thought it better to refrain from specifying whom it was hard to resist kissing.

"Well, if you won't tell on me, I won't tell on you; and we'll each kiss him in a place where we won't damage him any. His hand won't do, because it's so apt to go into his mouth, but I think his foot's safe."

She drew off the stubby white kid shoe and shapeless little sock, and disclosed a fat lump of pink flesh tastefully garnished with five little pink buttons. "O-oh!" she murmured, enraptured; and, bending down, she lifted it in her hand and kissed it.

"Good night, sweet," she said softly.

Clive knelt beside her, took the little fat foot and the hand that held it into his own hand, and laid his lips in a kiss that included them both.

"Good night, sweet," he whispered in his turn.

Then he rose to his feet, breathless with amazement.

IV

MORNING came with a slant of dusty sunlight, and a cheerful crow of infant conversation, none too soon, either, for Clive, to whom the night on the horsehair sofa had seemed several years long. As soon as he heard his housemates stirring, he rose with alacrity, made up the fire, set a pail of fresh water outside the bedroom door, and hurried out to the great open spaces to wash.

It was a brilliant morning. In the cup-like valley the mists of the night before still hovered, but on the encircling mountain tops the sun shone glorious. Clive splashed in the cold, clear river, dried himself inadequately with his clothes, and then scrambled into them. Then, a giant refreshed, he strolled over to the wrecked car, which lay on its side, very damp and damaged, in the soggy meadow, and poked about experimentally in its vitals.

It seemed, to his layman's eye, an irredeemable wreck. However, this discovery had no power to depress him; flushed with cold bathing and hunger, and an unwonted zest of life, he sang on his way back to the house, and entered the door like a brisk messenger of the morning.

Jean was already moving about the living room, tidying the table and preparing for breakfast. She had made good use of her night's rest, and walked, though limpingly, with less effort than yesterday. Her flannel frock, white with red facings, looked, by some esoteric feminine trick, as fresh as if it were just starting on its adventures, and her small, piquant face, though for the first time in his acquaintance with it, innocent of make-up, seemed more vividly alive than ever. Her hat was on, her little hand bag lay on the table; evidently she was ready for action.

"Cheerio!" she greeted him briskly. "How are you, after the night on the swan's-down-covered poppies?"

"Only a little bruised, thank you. How did you make out? You look as fit as a fiddle."

"Oh, I slept whenever the mattress did; it's stuffed with corncocks, and bucks like a broncho. The baby never peeped. And see how dressy he is! There was a whole trousseau in the top of his hamper."

"He's got Solomon looking like a hobo. If somebody'd brought *me* in a basket, I might be able to do you more credit. What, bacon again?"

"Yes, they must have thought that nurse was a human vacuum. There's some coffee and a few more sandwiches, too. Come on, let's absorb it; no telling when we may have to jump."

They drew up to the table, and began what was, to Clive, an even more pleasing function than supper had been. The coffee, which they heated in the top of the thermos bottle, steamed invitingly; the fire burned brighter; the bacon sizzled. They were very hungry, and, suddenly, very old friends.

The baby, sitting in his basket and smacking at his bottle in his uncouth way, lent a touch of domesticity which yesterday morning would have been disconcerting, but which to-day seemed quite natural. Clive even felt a curious satisfaction in drinking with Jean out of the one cup, turn and turn about; it was unsanitary, but there was a certain trusting sociability about it.

Jean, however, had no attention to spare for anything but the immediate problem; it was evident that whatever she did she did single-mindedly. As she ate she spread the situation out for consideration.

"Now, if the chauffeur reports to his employer this morning, as he said he was

going to, of course he'll report that the baby wasn't here. Then the lot of them will come hot-footing out to see about it. We must get away first. Can we tinker up our car enough to start?"

"Not a ghost of a sniff of a chance. It's as dead as the Progressive Party."

"Then we'll just have to go on foot. If you'll carry the hamper—"

"My dear girl, talk sense. How far do you think you could go on *that* foot? They'd catch you before you'd traveled three inches."

"Well, then we'll have to dodge. We'll hide in the woods until they're gone, and trust to luck for some one to pick us up."

"Fat chance of our getting picked up on this road that nobody travels once in Methuselah's age! If we take to the woods, we may as well draw up a contract with the birds right now to bury us with leaves. Looks to me as if Langham had us trapped. The simplest thing, and the most sensible, would be to deliver the infant to him, and ask him to get us out of here."

Jean's eyes flashed, and her unrouged cheeks flamed rose red.

"I tell you, Clive Denby," she said vehemently, "that man gets that baby over my cremated corpse, and not otherwise. *You* may stay here and go back with him if you feel like it; in fact, I should strongly advise you to. I thank you for helping me so far; I realize that it was altruistic of you, when you don't care one *penny* about the blessed lamb, and I'll simply say good—Oh! What's that?"

Clive started as she did, and they both listened in strained silence. Thinly, but distinctly, there fell upon their ears the buzz of an approaching motor.

"They're coming!" cried Jean. "Oh, quick, quick! I'll take the baby—go out the back door—oh, *run!*" And, forgetting that she was in the act of bidding him an eternal farewell, she shoved him rapidly from the room, through the musty kitchen, and out of the house.

Aided by excitement, she hopped almost as nimbly as if she were quite able-bodied, and they gained the shelter of the trees in a jiffy, Clive trying to help her as he had done last night, but outdistanced by her impetuosity, able only to hang ineffectually to her elbow in the manner of a subway gallant. But, rapid as their progress was, they arrived none too soon; almost before they were well ensconced, the big car

dashed up the muddy lane that connected the house with the road.

"We must dig in deeper, so they won't see us," whispered Jean. "But, oh, we must stay close, so we can hear what they say! And if the baby should cry—"

"Couldn't we throw something over his head? That's what they do with horses."

"No, *no!* He's safe as long as his bottle lasts, and perhaps they'll be gone before the milk is. Anyway, we *must* listen; their plans are enormously important to ours."

Clive perceived that she had forgotten her indignation with him in the stress of this new excitement, and included him in her future reckonings; and, somewhat to his own surprise, he found himself warming with relief at the knowledge.

"Better put the basket down and lean on me," he counseled. "You're giving that ankle too much to do."

Accepting his suggestion with her single-minded simplicity, she deposited the baby carefully, bottle side up, and leaned against his shoulder. The big car had now stopped as near the house as the rudimentary drive permitted, and together, taut with suspense, they peered out through the leaves at the movements of the new arrivals.

The chauffeur, a woman whose nasal voice proclaimed her the discontented nurse of last night's visit, and a big, handsome, dominant man as glossy as his car, all got out in a great hurry and scuffed through the grass to the front door, talking acrimoniously.

"I don't see why you couldn't have told me last night, Cummings," the big man was saying. "Nice time to come after them now, when they've had twelve hours to get away in!"

"I told ya, Mr. Langham, I done all I could. Nobody at your hotel knew last night where you was. You told me to report first thing this mornin', an' I did."

"I should say you did; I'd hardly been to bed at all. Miss Gibbs, I should think you might have done something!"

"Well, if I didn't do enough, Mr. Langham! Coming out in the dead of night to this awful place—getting soaked through—sleeping in that dump of a village, on a bed like a *board*—well, I'd like to know *what*—"

"You could have shown a little initiative, couldn't you? I trusted you with this job because I thought you had brains, but it seems to me—"

Squabbling briskly, they entered the house. Clive and Jean looked at each other.

"And *that's* the kind of disposition you were going to throw this poor babe to!" she reproached.

"Oh, come, you know the man's had provocation—foiled in the midst of a kidnapping, roused up from his first sleep to be notified of it, and obliged to travel before breakfast in the same car with that woman's voice. You'd be fractious yourself."

"I think he's a brute. I wonder what they'll do next? Of course they can see we haven't been gone long—do you think they'll search the woods?"

"Gosh, I hope not! We'd better be ready with a plausible yarn in case they do; the kid isn't the kind of evidence you can hide in your hatband."

Jean's eyes flashed. "I shall tell him the simple, literal truth, which is that I'm preventing a brute from stealing a helpless child from its mother, and that he'll succeed over my dead body. I shall tell him I'm a friend of Evelyn's, and that I'm going to take the baby back to her the very first minute I can. And if he doesn't like that—"

"Sh!" interrupted Clive. "They're coming back!"

The angry voices were indeed fretting the air again, and in a moment the search party appeared, in a great hurry.

"I don't care, there *was* a woman in it!" clamored the nurse. "If you don't believe me, look at this powder puff!"

"But she *couldn't* have got here so soon!" protested Langham angrily. "I tell you she spent the night in New York! That damned nurse must have double crossed me—and yet that can't be it, for she wasn't to get her money until to-day. If I thought—"

"It *was* a woman!" yapped the nurse. "I tell you here's her *powder* puff!"

"Point is," interjected the chauffeur, who was evidently practical, like Jean, "whatcha gonna do now?"

"Find out which way they went," returned Langham, lowering, "and follow till I catch them."

"Well, they's only two ways they could 'a' went," argued the chauffeur, "up the road an' down the road. Couldn't 'a' been up the road if it was only five minutes ago, 'cause we'd 'a' met 'em. Couldn't 'a' been down the road, 'cause look a' that mud—"

smooth as a baby's cheek. So—ho-lee smoke!"

"What was it that struck you?" demanded Langham.

"Look a' that!"

The chauffeur's thumb, which had been demonstrating geographic possibilities, set dramatically toward the grassy bank by the edge of the meadow, and the eyes of the others, following its direction, pounced on the prostrate roadster.

"By gad!" ejaculated Langham. "The car she came in!"

He began to run toward it, plowing heavily through the wet grass. The others followed him, and in an instant the house hid them from view.

Jean seized Clive's sleeve, her eyes brilliant with excitement.

"Now's our chance!" she cried. "Quick, quick! While they're out of sight, we'll get away in their car!"

Clive stared at her. Once embarked on a crime, this girl certainly was thorough. "But it's *his* car, Jean!" he protested. "We can't *steal* it!"

"We have just as much right to as he has to steal Evelyn's baby. We'll give it back to him as soon as we're through with it. Hurry, hurry! If you won't come, I'll do it alone!"

She caught up the baby and began to hobble as fast as she could toward the car.

Clive gazed after her blankly. The determined set of her slender back, the pathetic gallantry of her limping but resolute gait, knocked at his pity. He believed she was perfectly capable of doing what she said, or at least attempting it; but to drive a heavy car on such roads and with such handicaps was not much less than suicide. He shivered at thought of the possibilities.

Jean stumbled on a stone, and an involuntary moan escaped her.

"Wait, Jean!" he cried. "I'm with you!" And he ran after her, at the top of his speed, toward the car.

V

THE wealthy mechanism started with a purr, and then rose shrilly into a *motif* rather like the opening whimper of "Die Walküre." It was elegantly subdued in volume, and Clive, glancing over his shoulder as they slid into motion, and seeing the other group bending over Jean's car in complete absorption, hoped it would be possible to escape unobserved.

As they swung around a sharp turn of the road, however, the bottle slipped from the baby's mouth; and his outraged spirit, already perturbed by so much rapid movement during a function which he was accustomed to regard as one of contemplative calm, released itself in a violent roar through the orifice suddenly made available.

The sound easily bridged the short distance between the two cars. It could have bridged the Hudson. The search party all jumped, and stood suddenly erect; and Mr. Langham began to run toward the fugitives, shouting.

"Duck, Jean!" cried Clive, speeding ahead. "Don't let him see you!"

"Why not?" demanded Jean, from the back seat. "Am I ashamed?" And she struggled precariously to her feet and held the baby aloft, like Barbara Frietchie upholding her country's flag.

The heroic gesture had no time to register, because they were already taking the next curve, and she sat down so suddenly and lowly that the back of the car hid her even before the shoulder of the mountain did. Still, it seemed to afford her satisfaction; she breathed deeply through her nose, and clutched the baby tight as she deftly stopped the hole in his face with the bottle.

When the mountain was safely set between them and their foes, Clive slackened speed and turned halfway around for a conference.

"There's the first round safely over," he said, "with our opponent on the mat, taking the count. He'll count a good while, too; he'll have to twiddle his thumbs while the chauffeur tramps to the nearest town for a car. What's next from us?"

"Next from us, of course," said Jean, "is to take this babe to Evelyn. But it's no use taking him until she gets back from New York; that monster or one of his minions will only swipe him again. I suppose we'll have to hang around in the offing until her train gets in."

"What time will that be?"

"Well, let's see. Evelyn's house is at Torrington, but only the butter-and-egg trains stop there; if she's in a hurry to get back she'll take the express to Winfield, and that arrives about ten. That's less than two hours. Do you suppose he can catch up with us before then?"

"Not a chance. And I know a way to make doubly sure that he won't. We'll plant a false clew, and lead him in the

wrong direction. Then we can withdraw to the horizon line and enjoy life until it's time to deliver the kid."

"Are you sure that will help?"

"Absolutely. It's the way all the best criminals do. Let's see, there's smoke 'way off there on the right; we'll mosey over there and sow our alibi."

They followed the convolutions of the narrow road until they came to a lonely farmhouse embedded in a dimple of the hills. It was almost as ramshackle as the one they had just left, and looked—save for the thin curl of smoke—as deserted; but by following the rutted track to the farmyard they discovered a slatternly woman laboriously extracting water from a creaking pump. She stopped her work to stare at them in an open-mouthed astonishment that testified to the rarity of such encounters in her annals.

"Good morning," said Clive. "If we keep on along this road, what's the next town we come to?"

"Huh?" returned the woman blankly.

"What's the first place this road takes us to? Town? Village? City?"

"Huh?" repeated the woman, apparently stunned by the question.

Clive was about to roar it at her, but Jean, leaning out of the rear window, put it more understandingly.

"The place where you buy groceries, you know," she explained. "The place where you go to the movies. It has a name, I feel sure; what do you call it?"

The woman stared at her, unable to grasp the extent of such abysmal ignorance. "You — never — heard — o' — Higby!" she said, slowly and hoarsely.

"Higby! That's it!" exclaimed Clive.

"That's where we're going. Thank you. Good-by, madam; we are now on our way to Higby."

"If anybody asks for us," added Jean, watering the seed, "tell them we've gone to Higby. Don't forget."

"Didn't *they* never hear o' Higby, neither?" asked the woman. "Good land! Where *was* you-all brought up?"

They left her still staring, and continued Higbyward. At the next turn they met a girl picking blackberries, and to her Clive imparted, in loud and earnest tones, the information that they were going to Higby. After a little they encountered a vacant-minded-looking boy driving a vacant-minded-looking cow to some vague bourse of

which neither seemed fully cognizant, and with him also Clive shared, by means of inquiries and innuendoes, the knowledge of their destination. This done, he heaved a sigh of achievement, passed another elbow of the hills, and came to a crossroads.

Here he stopped the car.

"We are now," said he, "standing with reluctant feet where the sand and gravel meet. All the four corners of the earth are open to us, with the sole exception of Higby. Which way shall we go?"

"Turn to the left," directed Jean, "and drive back into the country. I know where we are now. Winfield's over there, not very far; we'll run into a road somewhere beyond those woods that will take us straight to the station, when we're ready."

"How's Cyril, the lost heir, standing the trip?"

"Beautifully, the precious peach. Did you ever *see* such a good baby? I'd like to steal him myself."

"Seems to me you're putting up a pretty good bluff at it. I don't suppose you call what you're doing, leaving him to wither on the parent stem."

"Oh, well, you know what I mean—in an hour or so I'll have to give him up. Drive slow, Clive; this is what Browning called 'The Last Ride Together.'"

Their way lay through the lovely curving trails of the Berkshire hinterlands, between low friendly mountains and thick groves fringed with goldenrod and asters. The morning was delicious—warm and pine smelling, yet edged with the crispness of approaching autumn.

The baby was in the jovial mood that follows emptying a bottle; Jean sang to him, gay little nursery jingles that made him chuckle knowingly; and he obliged, in return, with a vague but hearty song of which he had forgotten the words and never known the tune, but which met with considerably greater success than many a drawing-room ditty delivered under the same circumstances. Jean laughed and hugged him ecstatically, and Clive spent all the time that he could spare from driving in glancing enviously over his shoulder at the happy pair.

"This is too gorgeous a day," remarked Clive presently, "for a fellow to spend hanging on to the coat tails of other people's fun. Let's get out and sit under the trees somewhere, and be clubby."

"All right," agreed Jean readily. "We

don't want to get to Winfield too soon, do we? And there isn't any danger from George Langham now; if his chauffeur was a bolt of greased lightning, he couldn't possibly shoot to any town and back again with a car in time to catch us before that train gets in."

"And, anyway," interjected Clive, "they'll go by way of Higby."

"So we might turn up this little track, and rest our bones awhile."

Clive swung the car into the shelter of the trees, and they stepped out gladly onto the warm pine needles, and found a place to settle down on the side of a little knoll. Before them the road ran down into a broad, peaceful valley, golden with harvest fields. The sun was high and brilliant now, the earth giving up its rich store of sweet smells; Jean was flushed with adventure and enjoyment, the baby in a mellow after-breakfast mood. Clive stretched out on the soft carpet, at peace with the world. He had quite forgotten how bored he was.

"My Aunt Miranda, this is the life!" he said, contentedly. "I'd like to spend ten years in exactly this spot and precisely this weather. Topping, isn't it, Jean—resting in the sun, looking up at the clouds and the tree tops?"

Jean, however, was too energetic for the lotos-eater viewpoint. She sat up straight, leaning against a tree.

"A little of it's all very well," she conceded, "but ten minutes would be better than ten years. You'd want to be up and doing before long."

"Oh, no, I shouldn't. I never want to get up again."

"Then you've no ambition."

"I don't believe I have. What is there to be ambitious for?"

"Why, millions of things. The work of the world."

"I care not who does the work of the world, if the guys that run it will let me write its songs."

"Well, why don't you write them, then?"

"What's the use? Nobody'd publish them."

"Have you ever tried?"

"No. The way my beastly old uncle fought me about music soured me on the stuff forever."

Jean's eyes brightened combatively. "It ought to make you all the keener on it, the way it does me about nursing. I can't un-

derstand people quitting on a thing just because of a little opposition."

Clive stiffened, lifting himself on one elbow to face her. "That's all very well for you, with your sure-fire bread and butter and sugar. But I don't have a sou unless I earn it, and you know perfectly well I can't make a living out of music."

"Well, what did you do before? What was the job you told me you lost?"

"Selling bonds. Trudging around showing investments I didn't care a whoop about down the throats of men that didn't want 'em. Gosh, what a life! I was about ready to end it all in the river—only it was too much trouble."

Jean's eyes emitted their ready flash. "I don't wonder you lost it. What did you take it for? With all the things there are to do—at your age, and with your equipment—good gracious, Clive, what's the matter with you? Why don't you take a *real* job, and *work* at it, and be of some use in the world?"

"Da! Da! Da!" applauded the baby, whanging the pine carpet with his empty bottle.

Clive sat up very stiff and straight. "You talk as if you thought I ought to be ashamed of something, simply because I don't go ballyhooing around about the sanctity of labor, and what a valuable asset I am to society. That's not my line."

"I never *said* you should ballyhoo about it; I said you should *do* it. And you should. Gracious, I'm sick enough about being useless myself—and I'm only a girl; and not twenty-one yet—watch me when I get there! But for a *man* to droop around like a weeping willow, waiting for the world to *hang* a job on him like a *garland*—well—"

Something had gone wrong with the radiant morning. The sun still shone, the pine tops still sang softly, the little white clouds still sailed across the sky; but all the peaceful contentment had vanished. Jean's cheeks flamed, Clive's eyes gloomed beneath lowering brows, and even the chortling baby began to look from one to the other with a dawning doubt. Yes, something had certainly gone wrong.

Clive drew himself together to deliver a crushing retort. But before he could speak, the stormy current of their mood was sharply switched into another channel.

"Hey, you!" shouted a voice at their very elbows. "Don't move! I've got ye!"

Clive and Jean turned with a start, and saw, coming toward them from the woodland track, a long, narrow, dusty Yankee in the khaki-colored uniform of the rural constabulary. A little way behind him a red motor cycle—whose approach they had evidently been too absorbed in their argument to heed—stood in the roadside shrubbery. Clive jumped to his feet. His conviction of perfect security, and his quarrel with Jean, had made him forget the fact that he was compounding a felony; but now he was aware of a dawning uneasiness beneath the eye of the law.

"No use resistin'," remarked the law's minion sternly, displaying, as he strode forward, a revolver's mouth as uncompromising as his own. "I got ye covered. Can't git away with crime in *this* neighborhood—leastways, not while I'm around."

Clive quailed. He had had no idea that their crime could bring them such speedy punishment, and could not imagine how all their plans had gone awry. But he had a normal masculine respect for law, and was prepared to submit to it.

"What do you accuse us of?" he asked feebly.

"Of stealin' a car an' kidnagin' a child," averred the policeman, uncompromisingly.

"Whose car and whose child?"

"Oh, quit your bluffin'! You know as well as I do that it's George Langham's car an' George Langham's kid. I'll put you two in jail, an' take 'em back to him."

Clive was ready to bow his head in acquiescence to this just decree; indeed, he saw no other possible course. He moved forward, reluctant but resigned. But he was not the only person involved, as he was soon to discover.

Jean had sprung to her feet, and was clutching the child to her breast, facing the foe with crimson cheeks and flashing eyes. She had already been glowing briskly when the minion of the law interrupted the tête-à-tête; now she fairly blazed.

"What did you say you were going to do?" she demanded.

"Goin' to put ye in jail, miss," answered the constable.

"And who do you think I am?"

"I know who ye are right enough. You're the nurse Mrs. Langham fired an' Mr. Langham hired, an' you double crossed 'em both. Mr. Langham don't want to set eyes on ye again; but he wants his kid, an' he's goin' to git him pretty P. D. Q."

"Is he, indeed!" flashed Jean, quivering. "You may go back to your Mr. Langham and tell him that he will get this child when I'm dead, and not before. Do you know whose child this is?"

"Whose is it?" inquired the constable, gaping.

"Mine!" cried Jean superbly. "Arrest me, if you want to; send me to jail, if you please; but you'll never, never, never take my child from me!"

VI

SHE flamed so gloriously, she flung out her statement with such magnificent assurance, that the policeman was completely daunted. A startled pause ensued.

"Oh!" mumbled the constable lamely, at last. "I guess I was in too much of a hurry."

"I guess you were," retorted Jean haughtily, looking at him as a queen might look at a rather soiled worm.

"I never thought," he admitted, further intimidated by her look, "that this kid could be anybody but Langham's kid."

"Then," said Jean crushingly, "you'd better learn to think before you act."

"I s'pose I better," agreed the policeman humbly.

Clive, looking on, could hardly wonder to see him thus cowed; Jean was so convincing that he half believed her himself. But he knew that the situation was sustained only by her personal power; if the cold, undermining force of logic got to work on it, it would not have a leg left to stand on. To be carried off intact, it must be carried off instantaneously. Angry as he was at Jean, he felt that he could not forsake her at this crisis. He decided to take a hand.

"Well, it's time we were under way," he said to Jean. "Give me the baby, and I'll carry him to the car."

But the mention of the car was a tactical error, and Clive's intrusion into the conversation a fatal one. The officer removed his hypnotized gaze from Jean, and fixed it on the male conspirator with renewed suspicion.

"That car, now," he said. "The missus here explained about the baby, but I ain't heard no explanation about the car. It's Langham's car, all right; same description, same license number, all complete. How come ye by it?"

Jean flashed Clive a look of searing scorn. Evidently she had had quite a dif-

ferent handling of the situation in mind, and this masculine bungling infuriated her. "You incompetent, degenerate moron," her look said, "I had everything going just as it should, and now you have to stick your inept, asinine, interfering oar in! Why couldn't you leave me alone, idiot?"

It was her look, more than the officer's question, that disconcerted Clive, but between them they robbed him completely of the calm self-possession needed to carry off his part. His color rose, his glance wavered; he stood confounded, the picture of confessed guilt.

"The car?" he repeated. "Oh, yes, the car. I forgot about the car."

"I sort o' guessed ye did," returned the officer dryly. "Well, now ye can remember it. Come along with me, an' we'll see if we can improve your memory at the police station."

Jean's look simply blistered him. "Imbecile, saphead, halfwit!" it said furiously. "Now see what you've done!"

Stung by its implications, Clive tried to bluster his way back to her respect.

"Police station!" he said severely. "Of course we won't go to the police station! We're perfectly quiet, respectable people. What makes you bother us? Can't we take a little drive with our—our family, without interference from the police?"

The hopeless confusion that overwhelmed him as he tried thus casually to throw an air of innocent domesticity over the occasion completed his undoing. His hang-dog look would have convicted a bishop. The constable grew portentous, and drew a pair of handcuffs from his pocket.

"Stick out your hands!" he said briefly.

But Jean, with a final incinerating glance, stepped into the breach again.

"What nonsense!" she said smoothly. "Of course we'll go with you, officer. He's only joking. Go on, John, get in; I'll carry the baby myself, thank you. Officer, will you help me to the car? I have a sprained ankle."

This speech—proclaiming, as with a megaphone, that the alliance between them was dissolved, and that henceforth she regarded him as an enemy alien—rekindled Clive's anger. Treat him like an idiot because he was trying to get her out of trouble, would she? Shoo him into the car like a naughty, runaway puppy, and ask this country cop's help instead of his?

He had a great mind to leave her flat. She got them both into this mess; now let her get herself out of it. It would be simple enough to say, "Yes, this is Mr. Langham's car, and Mr. Langham's baby. This young lady appropriated them both, and I will now leave her free to enjoy them."

However, for some reason or other he could not bring himself to take this step. Though he was boiling with indignation, he went without audible protest to the car, opened the doors, and stowed the party inside. The policeman had already parted with a little of his severity under the influence of Jean's charming dependence, and spoke to them firmly, but not unkindly.

"Now you go right straight along this road till you git to the blinkin' sign," he said, "an' then turn to the left into Winfield. I'll be right behind ye on the motor bike, an' if I see ye tryin' any funny business at the crossroads, I'll shoot, sure as shad's shad. When ye git int' the town, go right down Main Street till ye see the depot. Red brick buildin' next to it's the police station. That's where you git off."

Chuckling a little at his grim wit, he closed the doors upon them, and followed on foot as they lurched down the track to the main road. In a minute they heard the coughing and spitting of his motor preparing to get under way; and in another minute the small procession was moving rapidly toward the village.

As they journeyed, Jean maintained a rigorous silence. She sat, as before, in the back seat with the baby, and though Clive would by no means lower his dignity by turning around to see how she was comporting herself, he felt even through the back of his head that she was ignoring him.

He knew well enough that he had imperiled her hold on the invaluable baby, and that that was a sin she would find it very hard to forgive. Well, he didn't need her forgiveness. He had no use for girls, anyway. He had long realized that they bored him to despair.

Until they had passed the "blinkin' sign" and entered the town, he preserved a silence as rigorous as hers. Then he began to whistle, lightly and rather slighting-ly, "*Donna è mobile*."

Whether she caught the disparaging drift of his melody or not Clive did not know, but, as they came within sight of the railway station, she spoke to him, coldly and impersonally.

"If you feel like getting out of this affair, I'm perfectly willing. Go now, if you care to."

He answered her as coldly. "I don't care to. I've gone this far with it; I'll see it through."

"Very well. I thank you for your help. But, if you stay in it, please, when things are going all right, don't interfere and put them all wrong again."

"I'd know better how to comply with your wishes if I knew what you meant by 'all right' and 'all wrong,'" returned Clive. "I always was taught it was wrong to tell lies, myself."

"I suppose you think it's more wrong to tell a fib to a person who's interfering in other people's affairs than to throw an innocent baby to the wolves! I'm glad I haven't got that kind of conscience."

"I should think a conscience of any kind was the least of your troubles. But if you want to call it a conscience, all right. I'll undertake to go by it until this business is over."

"You needn't bother yourself if you don't wish to. If you don't like my ethics, dig up some of your own, and see if they agree better with the baby."

The temperature of the conversation was rising again, rapidly. But before there was time for anything in the way of an explosion, the motor cycle drew alongside the car, and the long policeman waved his hand toward an unpretentious brick structure next to the railway station.

"Terminal!" he called, with his macabre humor. "Everybody out!"

Clive stopped the car and climbed out promptly, realizing that there was nothing to be gained by delay. But when he opened the door for Jean, she—usually so quick in her movements and decisions—surprised him by hesitating.

"The baby's just dropping off to sleep," she said. "It's time for his morning nap, and if he gets half a chance he'll take it. I hate to disturb him by taking him up again."

Clive looked at the child. It was true; that pattern and paragon of infant behavior, realizing the approach of ten o'clock, was peacefully preparing for his ten o'clock sleep. He looked the picture of drowsy repose, and it did seem a pity to disarrange him.

"Why don't you leave him here?" he said. "He's perfectly safe."

"Do you think he is?" asked Jean anxiously of the policeman.

"Sure!" replied that functionary. "Ain't anybody would think of interferin' with private property right in front o' the police station. Leave him be."

"It's only good sense," said Clive, "to let sleeping dogs lie."

Jean flashed him a look of withering indignation at the simile, but the baby at that moment giving the pinkest and most perfect of yawns, and dropping his curving eyelashes with an air of complete finality on his fat little cheeks, she decided to accept the advice. Drawing the lid of the basket down far enough to hide the infant from the public eye, she alighted, and closed the door of the car.

As they accompanied the constable into his citadel, Clive noticed a woman peering at them from the door of the railway station. She peered so intently that he observed her closely in return; a dark, rather foreign-looking woman she was, with very black eyes.

"Do you know that woman, Jean?" he asked. "She seems to be looking at you."

Jean's eyes followed his to the woman in the doorway, and she shook her head. "No, I never saw her before. Do you know her?" she asked the policeman.

He looked too, but as he did so the woman suddenly withdrew from their sight into the dim interior of the building, and he turned away indifferently.

"Naw," he said. "Must be a stranger. This time o' year," he added proudly, "there's strangers passin' through town every day."

"But it seems she must know some of us," insisted Clive. "She looked at us so remarkably hard."

"I suppose," said Jean, "she's hardly used to seeing people of our sort in the custody of a policeman."

"Oh, this time o' the year," returned the constable, "we take in lots of 'em. You'd be surprised."

They were now at the door of the police station, and a step across its threshold took them into the august presence of the chief. He was a rotund, important little man. His eyes looked out at them over his round cheeks with a stern and challenging glance, warning the world to take him seriously.

"Name!" he demanded severely of Jean, who led the procession. As he spoke he hastily brushed a litter of newspapers

and a layer of dust off the vast ledger on his desk.

"Winifred A. Wells," answered Jean glibly; she had evidently prepared her campaign during the silent drive.

"Address!"

"Nine East Van Dusen Street, Ogdensburg, New York."

"Offense!"

The long, thin constable stepped proudly to the fore.

"This is the party, chief. Party we're lookin' for."

"No! Not the party that stole G. F. Langham's kid an' car!"

"I didn't steal his kiddie car, chief," averred Jean, with a respectful manner and a charming smile. "I'll tell you all about it. The baby is mine; you'd know it if he weren't asleep, by the likeness. The car does belong to the Langhams, but I was taking it home. My car has been disabled lately, and Mrs. Langham, an old friend of mine, said I'd do her a favor if I'd use this one. A man of your experience, chief, can see at a glance that I'm not a thief!"

She fixed him with an earnest gaze from her clear and lovely eyes, and the chief was obviously impressed. He sat gazing back at her, melting visibly. Clive gazed at her, too, amazed that a girl could be so mendacious and look so innocent.

"No, by gravy, if you're a thief, I'm a five-toed kangaroo!" declared the rotund chief warmly. "How come you took this young lady up, Iry? I'm surprised at you. You might 'a' seen she wasn't no thief."

"Well, that's a great note!" retorted the policeman, aggrieved. "You send me out to nail this Langham crime if it takes a leg, an' then when I bring in the goods you jaw me for it! Didn't Langham telephone that a dark-eyed young party stole his car, an' that we was to catch her alive or dead? Ain't that the car out there? And ain't that party got dark eyes? You'd 'a' been mad enough if I *hadn't* took her up!"

"That's so," agreed the chief, fair-mindedly. "You *have* got the car, ye know, miss, an' Langham did telephone you was to be took up. How come he didn't know it was you, if you're sech a friend o' the family's?"

"Oh, I can explain that," said Jean, her hypnotic gaze steadily upon him. "Mr. Langham has been away on a—business trip. He hasn't seen his wife since the accident to my car—since before that, in fact.

He didn't know she had lent me this one. And I think he has me mixed with a discharged servant—a nurse—that he's suspicious of."

"That's right," admitted the chief. "He says the nurse went off in his car an' left him with a smashed one, an' only fer his shofer bein' able to tinker it up he'd 'a' been stuck all day in the mud. He says he's goin' to hunt every place there is, except Higby, till he runs her down."

Clive glanced significantly at Jean. This explained the early pursuit. But one point perplexed him.

"Why not Higby?" he asked eagerly, speaking for the first time.

"Becuz the party that took the car was so careful to tell everybody they was *goin'* to Higby."

This time Jean glanced at Clive with a glint of malice. The one touch you did contribute was no good, her glance seemed to say.

The brief interchange was enough to bring Clive Denby to the notice of the inquisition. The long policeman looked at him disapprovingly.

"Wasn't no mention of a man in this, was there?" he suggested.

"No, so there wasn't," agreed the chief.

"Who is that feller, marm?"

"That?" returned Jean negligently.

"Oh, that's just my husband."

Clive stiffened; there seemed something unnecessarily slighting in her manner of labeling and casting him aside, and he felt a sudden impulse of sympathy for the misprized Mr. Langham.

"I have my uses," he said coldly. "I drive the car and do the dirty work and take the blame."

"No home would be complete without a husband or so," agreed Jean sweetly. "I assure you, chief, he's quite harmless. You don't mind if we go on our way now, do you? Mrs. Langham's awfully anxious to get her car, as you know. Good-by, chief; good-by, officer; it's been a pleasure to meet you." She turned to go.

"Here, hold on a minute!" exclaimed the chief uneasily. "I ain't quite satisfied to let you go like this. 'Tain't that I don't believe ye, ma'am; I know better'n to doubt the word of a lady like you; but some way I don't feel quite sure o' the gent."

"He can't help his looks," said Jean. "And Mrs. Langham must get her car. Please let us go."

The chief looked like a man who had eaten something that pains him, and doesn't quite know what to do about it.

"I don't like to disoblige a lady," he said, "but jest the same—"

"Tell ye what, chief," suggested the constable. "Let 'em go, an' I'll go 'long with 'em an' make sure they git there."

At this suggestion the conspirators shot a startled glance at each other; and though Jean, with her depraved aptitude for dissimulation, was quick to mask hers with a smile of amusement, Clive's plainly registered uneasiness. The eye of the law did not fail to observe this symptom, and its two minions drew together for a whispered conference. Seeing their heads touching, Jean dropped her handkerchief; Clive stooped for it; and as he put it into her hand she slipped a murmured word in his ear.

"Keep with him down this street, then distract his attention and lose him. We can do it if you're wide-awake."

But, as if her words had been spoken in his ear instead of Clive's, the chief answered them. He was not as guileless as he looked.

"All right, you c'n go. But Iry here'll go along, an' jest to be sure ther' ain't no slip ups, he'll take you, ma'am, with him in the police car."

If Jean was dismayed at this pronouncement, she gave no sign. She acquiesced with a smile, waited with composure until the little flivver, with an enormous "P. D." covering its side, chortled to the door, and then went out with a cheerful farewell. Clive, taking his cue from her, also bore himself nonchalantly; but beneath his calm surface he was acutely uneasy. How in the world was he to see this thing through without her assistance? It was risky enough even when she was at hand; alone he would probably drive straight to jail.

But he reckoned without Jean's resourcefulness. As they emerged from the station house, and Iry held the door of the "P. D." chariot open for her, she explained impetuously, "Oh, I *must* see if my baby's all right!"

Then, standing beside the limousine and peering through the window, she murmured rapidly to Clive, "House called 'The Gables,' five or six miles from here, on the Torrington Road; granite gateposts; top of a hill. Don't get out till I do. Butler knows me. And for Heaven's sake, *don't* look at me and spill the beans again!"

Clive would have liked to give her a little brisk back talk, such as he felt she merited, but he had no opportunity. The baby was perfectly still; the basket was exactly as they had left it; the constable was waiting impatiently, and there was no excuse for delay. They both entered their respective vehicles, and the procession moved again. The rotund chief watched their departure from the doorway with mingled severity and regret.

Thanks to Jean's directions, Clive found the house without difficulty. He drove slowly, to keep in the neighborhood of the other car, but inevitably Mr. Langham's powerful engine gained on the hills, and he arrived at the gates first. Here he hovered uneasily, afraid of being observed from the house, watching anxiously over his shoulder for the other car. Before long it came; the policeman waved him forward, and they proceeded in good order up the drive to the front door.

Here there was a moment of tension. The butler recognized the limousine, and, evidently on his mistress's side in the domestic war, regarded it and its occupant with as much disfavor as a butler's countenance is permitted by nature to register. When his cold eye traveled from the enemy vehicle to the little coughing car with the enormous "P. D." on its side, his disapproval changed to horror.

"Mrs. Langham is *hout*, sir," he announced uncompromisingly, as Clive descended from his seat, "and," he added to the constable, "we don't 'ave any dealings with the police. This is a respectable 'ouse."

But Jean, hobbling quickly from her warder's side, went to the steps, and greeted him with her disarming smile.

"It's all right, Dunster!" she said. "I'm behind this affair. We're returning—the limousine—to Mrs. Langham." She looked at him significantly.

"W'y—w'y—Miss Adair!" stammered the butler, astonished.

"Not Miss Adair, Dunster," corrected Jean. "I'm married now—didn't you know? This is my husband, Mr. Wells. Mr. Matthew G. Wells," she added handsomely, "author of 'The Outlines of World Philosophy.'"

The butler bowed, impressed but puzzled, at the embarrassed Clive, and the constable, whose long, serious, Uncle Sam face proclaimed him an intellectual, stared at

him with respectful astonishment. Jean, however, gave them no time for straying in the primrose paths of learning.

"You're expecting Mrs. Langham very soon, aren't you?" she said. "Shall we go down with this car to meet her?"

"No, miss—madam—"Obbs 'as already gone with the sedan," answered the butler.

"But we're in an 'orrible fix, miss. Somebody's stowlen the biby!"

"So this officer told me," said Jean. "Frightful, isn't it?"

"We think it was instigated by Mr.—" the butler began to elucidate.

But Jean interrupted him hastily. "By the way, Dunster, this officer's hot and thirsty; he's been working hard, trying to find the kidnapers. Couldn't you have somebody take him to the back porch and give him a drink of—of lemonade?"

The austere face of the constable brightened; though intellectual, he was not above the creature comforts.

The butler, after looking at Jean earnestly, summoned a maid and gave her an order; the guardian of the law beamed and followed her; and Jean, Clive, and the butler were left alone.

"Good boy, Dunster," approved Jean. "You know how to take a hint. I wanted him out of the way because I have something very important to tell you. Dunster—I've got the baby!"

"*Wot*, miss?" exclaimed Dunster, open-mouthed with amazement.

"Yes, right there in the limousine!" said Jean happily. "We found him by accident, Mr. Denby and I, and when Mr. Langham came for him we ran away with him in Mr. Langham's car. We meant to wait until Mrs. Langham got back to bring him here, but this policeman arrested us, and we had to come now. I've had to tell him a few fibs—that Mrs. Langham lent me the car, that I was married—which I'm not—and that the baby was mine."

"My 'at!" ejaculated the butler, astonished out of his professional decorum. "You're a fair phenomena, miss!"

Jean beamed at this tribute. "You're too kind, Dunster. I'm only thankful I could do it. And now let's get him into the house while the policeman's out of the way, and then we'll have nothing on our minds but our hair." She smiled at Clive in the exuberance of her relief, and put her hand on his arm for support as she turned to the limousine.

"Lost article bureau!" she said gayly. "Missing babies returned while you wait!"

Vivid with elation, bright-eyed and radiant, she opened the rear door, lifted out the basket, and proudly raised the lid.

And the baby was gone.

VII

CLIVE and Jean stared at one another in blank bewilderment. The car was there, the basket was there, they were there; but where was the baby?

"He *can't* be gone!" cried Jean. "He was here a minute ago."

"Are you sure? We haven't opened the basket since we came."

"But it hasn't been out of our sight since we found it!"

"Except when we were inside the police station—don't forget that."

"Oh! But George Langham couldn't have followed us there. If he did, he'd have taken the car as well as the baby. He'd have come in and sent us to jail."

"It might have been some one else."

"Who else could possibly have known there was a baby in that basket?"

"Ereabouts," interposed the butler, with an owlish look of wisdom, "we suspicion the French nurse, the one the madam give notice to, of being the horthor of the crime."

"I know; so did Mr. Langham. But she couldn't possibly have known we had the baby, or—"

Jean broke off, and stared at Clive. He stared back at her. Simultaneously light broke upon them both.

"That woman—"

"At the station—"

"Who stared at us so—"

"With the black eyes—"

"That's 'er!" exclaimed the butler excitedly. "The blackest heyees she 'ad, like as if two pieces o' cowl was stuck in 'er 'ead. 'Black Heyees,' we used to call 'er—for a kind of a nickname like. 'Er heyees was that black—"

"But I don't see," said Clive, interrupting this vein of mellow reminiscence, "what she could have to gain by kidnaping the baby again. She took him once, and delivered him where she undertook to; why should she bother with him any more?"

"Oh!" cried Jean, exasperated by these deliberate masculine cogitations. "She was mad because we frustrated her, of course—didn't you *hear* him say she was to be paid this morning, and d'you suppose

he paid her when *we* had the baby? What does it *matter*, anyway? She's got the poor mite—and she *may* sell him, or *poison* him—we *must* get after her this minute!"

She put her foot on the step of the limousine, and, with the help of her slender, strong arms, prepared to clamber in. But Clive restrained her by a hand on her shoulder.

"Hold on!" he said. "If we take this car, we're no better off than we were before. The cop will be after us like a shot, and we'll land in the police station again."

"Oh, who cares?" returned Jean vehemently. "What does it matter what becomes of *us*, if we can save *him* from that horrible paregoric woman? Come *on*, Clive!"

"Oh, be your age, Jean! What good will we do him if we're sent to jail?"

"But we don't *need* to go to jail, stupid—if you'd only started when I told you to, instead of standing there talking, we could have been halfway to the station by now, and got the car back before the policeman missed it. We can do it yet. Come *on*, for Heaven's sake!"

"I won't. I've stolen this car once to oblige you, but I'm hanged if I'll do it again. Where could we go, anyway? We don't know where she is, or how to hunt for her."

Jean wrung her hands, exasperated to frenzy. "Can't you see, can't you *see*? She was at the railway station, she was going to take a *train*—she'll take him on it, maybe she's taking him *now*, and you stand there *gibbering*—Oh—" She tightened her hold on the door frame, and started to swing herself up. "I can't *stand* it! If you won't save him, I will!"

Clive seized both her shoulders and pulled her back roughly. "You'll do no such thing! Don't you know you'll kill yourself if you try? You don't set foot in that car, and neither do I. If we must go, we'll get the policeman to take us." He turned his head, keeping a tight hold of her, and shouted, "Officer!" Then, turning back to her, he added in a stern undertone: "Remember, you've got to behave yourself when he gets here. Keep your temper, and don't talk, or *you'll* spill the beans this time."

She flashed him, over her shoulder, a look of concentrated rage that would have scorched him if he had not been protected by an indignation nearly as hot as hers;

but the constable was already emerging from the rear of the house in response to his summons, and she constrained her tongue to silence. Clive let go his hold of her—not without a strong desire to give her a good shaking first—and they composed themselves into a scenic effect rather like a volcano, stable without, seething within.

"Officer," said Clive, "we have to go back to the station. We've forgotten—*er—we*—" He stumbled for an excuse.

"We find," interposed Jean quickly and smoothly, her superior talent for duplicity enabling her to rise above her rage, "that we have to meet Mrs. Langham at the train. Something the butler has just told us makes it necessary. She's due in only a few minutes, and we have to hurry. Of course, we wouldn't think"—she swallowed hard, but continued fluently—"of borrowing her car again, seeing how you feel about it; so will you take us in yours?"

The constable wiped his mouth, and looked regretfully toward the premises from which he had just come.

"Any great sweat?" he inquired.

"Yes, oh, yes!" said Jean urgently.

"We *must* catch—Mrs. Langham—at the train, before she has a chance to start home. It's most important. My husband will tell you so. The butler will tell you so—won't you, Dunster?"

"Yes, miss—yes, madam," mumbled the butler, unable to adjust himself to the rapid changes of his questioner's status.

"Well, if that's the case," said the constable, reflectively, "I don't like to disoblige a lady, an' I guess I better take ye. I reelize I sorter slandered ye before. But I wouldn't do it fer everybody; the lemons that grows in Mr. Langham's backyard certainly makes extra fine lemonade."

He wound ponderously, and climbed slowly into the seat. Jean, in a frenzy of impatience, followed him, and Clive wedged himself in beside her.

At last they were off. Clive could feel Jean's desperate hurry in the rigidity of her body, and in a subtle but potent emanation from her tense spirit; her fists were clenched, her eyes brilliant. But the constable had no such awareness of the need for haste. The way lay mostly down hill; it was winding and uneven, and he was a canny constable, who believed in safety first. They traveled with a deliberateness which Clive believed to be salutary, but which Jean found maddening.

"Oh, *please*," she burst out at last, "*can't* you go a little faster? We *must* be there when the train gets in!"

"We'll make it, all right," answered the constable comfortably. "Keep your shirt on, ma'am. So you're a writer by trade, mister?"

"Eh?" returned Clive, startled. He had quite forgotten the gratuitous honor which Jean's introduction had bestowed upon him.

"So ye write books, hey?"

"Oh—er—er—sometimes. Now and then."

"Why, I thought writers didn't do nothing else. How long's it take ye to write one?"

Clive, whose straightforward mind was already distracted by the problems of whether they would make the train, what they would do if they did, what they would do if they didn't, and how to assuage Jean's rage, found this disconcerting.

"Oh—er—two or three years," he hazarded, thinking vaguely of the "World Philosophy" with which Jean had so generously credited him.

"Two, three years! I thought ye'd say two or three months. A writer feller come here last summer—writin' a book about the Berkshires for the railroad, he was, called the 'American Trossachs,' or Tussocks, or somethin' like that—an' *he* got done in two, three weeks. I don't see how come a young feller like you can have a whole shelf o' books wrote like them they got o' yours down to the lib'ry, at *that* rate."

Jean, flashing a furious glance at Clive, came to the rescue.

"Mr. Wells is absent-minded," she explained. "He really works very rapidly. He did 'Ton de Bon Gai' in six months, and 'Courtship' in three—or was it four, M. G.? That was when he wasn't married himself, and didn't know much about it. Oh, officer, *do* go a little faster! We *must* make that train!"

"We'll make her, all right," reassured the officer. "See that turn in the railroad, over there in the valley to the eastward? Well, she ain't past that yet, an' that means we're ahead of her."

But just as he spoke, a puff of smoke and a shower of sparks heralded the arrival of the engine at the turn, and in a moment it had switched its black tail around the intervening mountain and was settling doggedly down to the home stretch of straight

track that led to Winfield. Jean caught her breath, Clive gave an exclamation, and even the dry official could be heard to whistle softly. It was one of those moments dear to the directors of motion pictures, who know what quickens the pulse of the public—a race between a train and a motor car, with something in the way of heartbeats as a prize.

"I'll give you ten dollars if you beat that train!" said Clive suddenly.

"I'll make it twenty dollars!" cried Jean recklessly.

"We-ell," said the constable, reflecting, but at the same time fondling the handle that lets in the gas, "I'm ag'in' speedin'—and the law's the law—but still, they's no use *bein'* a custodian o' the law if ye can't stretch it a mite now and then—an' Henry Greeley's a leetle too stuck up about that engine o' his anyway. Here goes!"

Here indeed—with a startling suddenness—went. The car went, they went; the landscape went, too, past them at a pace that seemed to presage the blurred little mountains rushing to the very edge of the earth and falling off. Having made up his mind to speed, the constable sped thoroughly. The train, now that it was well around the bend, laid itself in good earnest to covering the three miles to the station on time; and he fed his mettlesome steed with a lavish hand, and Jean and Clive clutched their hats, and the landscape that surrounded the uneven road heaved like a stormy sea.

Sometimes a turn of the road or the intrusion of a hill hid the train from view, and there was nothing to do but hold on and hope for the best. Sometimes a sudden opening out of the way before them showed the train puffing swiftly and indomitably toward the goal, and then they leaned forward in their seats in the effort to make the valiant little flivver go faster.

The race is truly to the swift. The constable slowed down as they entered the village, and when they approached the tracks their pace was quite decorous enough for people who are not themselves in danger of arrest for speeding; but the burst of ambition among the hills had done the work. They reached the station as the train came puffing in, and were completely staid and stationary beside the platform before it snorted to a stop.

The constable apparently had no thought but satisfaction that his engine had beaten

Henry Greeley's, and Clive had advanced only enough farther to wonder, in a dazed way, whether Jean's twenty dollars were to include his ten or to be additional to it. But Jean's mental process seemed to have gone several leaps ahead of either of them.

She had already fished a yellow bank note from her pocketbook, put it into the officer's hand, and, turning from him, raked the platform with a searching glance. Now she lifted herself upon her slenderly vigorous arms, and swung herself out of the car.

"What are you doing, Jean?" asked Clive, coming to full consciousness with a start.

"What I came for," answered Jean, and she began to hobble determinedly across the platform.

"Wait for me!" cried Clive, laboring to extract himself from the vehicle, to which the impact of the rushing air seemed to have glued him. "Let me help you!"

"Can't stop," she returned over her shoulder. "No time to waste. Can't you see?"

Following the direction of her halting but undeviating footsteps, he saw that she was making straight for the front car of the train; and looking ahead of her, he perceived the dimly familiar figure of a woman who was already climbing onto it. With one hand the woman was holding the turned-up collar of her coat about her face, and with the other she was clutching—with a curiously furtive gesture—a shapeless lump of fat, fluffy baby.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Clive, dumfounded. "She *has* got the kid!"

He did not realize, in his excitement, that he had spoken aloud. But the constable turned to fix him with a stare of awakened curiosity and suspicion.

"She has, has she!" he exclaimed. "I want to know!"

Jean's lynx ears caught both exclamations, and, without pausing in her rapid hobble, she flung back at Clive a glance of the hottest fury with which she had yet seared him.

"Goose!" she cried. "Do you want to throw him away? Oh, I never saw any one like you! I'm *through* with you!"

The brakeman shouted his raucous warning. She broke into a limping run, seized the step railings, hauled herself heroically up, and disappeared inside the car which the woman had entered just as the train started.

"Dog my cats," ejaculated the constable, "if I don't believe she is the nurse!"

Clive did not answer. He was staring, hypnotized, angry and bitterly hurt, after the departing train.

VIII

CLIVE could have stared after the train for an indefinite length of time; he was too outraged by the manner in which his devotion to a cause of which he had never really approved had been rewarded by ingratitude and slander, to heed anything else. But he was jostled back to consciousness of his surroundings by a movement of the constable's, a movement so impetuous that he was, in fact, nearly knocked down by it.

Having apparently ruminated sufficiently long on the problem of the vanishing baby to reach the action point, the constable had suddenly ejaculated "Cricky!" extricated his long legs from among the shafts and pedals of his chariot, projected himself forcefully toward the station, and disappeared inside the door.

Clive wondered dimly what had shot him off in such a hurry, but was too occupied with the injustice and unkindness of Jean to care. He found that he now disliked Jean intensely, not with the bored and weary dislike he had felt for her at the country club so long ago—impossible to believe that it was only yesterday—but with a sharp and piercing dislike that had a quality of misery about it.

She had been most unjust, most unfeeling to him; had involved him, against his better judgment, in a transaction of questionable ethics which might end in serious trouble, had lectured him unpleasantly about his purely personal affairs, and had finally run away from him with scornful gibes. A horrid girl, a girl one was well rid of! He did not know where she was gone, nor cared. He was through with her.

But before he could bury himself completely again in the dreary fog of his depression, his attention—aroused by the constable's movement—was caught by a voice not far removed from him. It was a woman's voice, anxious and excited; and it was exclaiming, on a sharp note of alarm.

"Oh, no! Not the baby!"

Mention of a baby was enough, in Clive's highly sensitized state, to arouse all his faculties. He turned to see where the voice came from, and discovered a very young

and very pretty woman in conversation with a neat gray chauffeur, who stood holding open the door of a smart blue coupé. Her childish-charming face was sharp with fright.

"What are you trying to tell me, Hobbs?" she was saying.

"Well, ma'am," returned the chauffeur, uncomfortably, "she acted mad as hops all day yesterday, an' when she took the baby out in the afternoon she didn't come back. O' course we all know she ain't far away, but—"

"Oh, Hobbs! If that awful woman has gone off with my baby, I shall die!"

Obviously this was Mrs. Langham, and obviously the next move was Clive's. Though he was through with Jean and the baby, and though he had become a complete woman hater, he could not let a mother die unaided on a station platform while he was possessed of knowledge that would prolong her life. He turned toward her, reluctantly but hastily.

"Mrs. Langham?" he said. "I heard you speaking. Don't be alarmed. I assure you your baby's all right."

Mrs. Langham turned to face him, suspicion swiftly chasing the alarm from her pretty face.

"Do you come from my—from George Langham?" she asked coldly.

"No, Mrs. Langham. I don't even know him. I come from—at least, in a sort of a way I'm associated with—or no, I couldn't say that either—but, anyway—I know the person who took your child."

"Then you're certainly in my—in George Langham's employ, for I know just as well as I know I'm alive that he's the one who had my baby stolen. Have you come to blackmail me?"

"No, no. I've only come to tell you that the baby's all right, and in good hands."

"Hasn't that wicked, abominable nurse got him?"

"Well—er—er—well, at the moment, yes."

Mrs. Langham's big blue eyes shot sparks at him.

"And you dare to deny that you're working with that man? And you dare to call that nurse's horrible hands good hands? Oh! Go away from me, quick, before I turn you over to the police!"

She was so vehement and so unreasonable that she exasperated him almost as

much as Jean did, and once again he felt an impulse of sympathy for the unpopular Mr. Langham. But the mention of the police made him proceed very circumspectly; he could ill afford to fall afoul of the law again, especially on the accusation of the other side of the house.

"I mean, Mrs. Langham," he explained as patiently as he could, "the nurse has him now, but she won't have him long. Jean Adair is going to get him."

She snatched the words from his mouth. "Jean Adair! You don't tell me that George Langham has got hold of her, too! Why, I never heard of such a thing! I wouldn't have believed it of Jean!"

"No, no. You don't understand. It's like this, Mrs. Langham. The nurse took the baby, and then Jean found him and took him, and then the nurse took him again, and then Jean—"

"Why, I never *did* hear of such a performance! *Imagine* Jean and that terrible woman working together against *me*! And I've known Jean since—since—why, it's simply *outrageous* of her!"

Clive felt a sentiment that was almost tenderness for George Langham. Who could judge his fellow man justly? No one knew what that husband might have suffered before he was driven to the merciful arms of the courts.

"If you'll only let me *explain*, Mrs. Langham. Jean took the baby *from* the nurse, the nurse found it out and took him back, and Jean's one idea is—"

"Where is the baby *now*, I ask you?"

"On that train that just went."

"And where's the nurse?"

"On the train, too, of course. She took him."

"And where's Jean?"

"Why, she's on the train, too. She—"

"There! You see! And that's where George Langham is, I suppose. Well, I knew he was simply *atrocious*, but I *never* thought he'd fall so low as to set my *own* friends against me. You just wait until I get hold of Jean Adair!"

Clive Denby felt a red-blooded he-man impulse to explain to her with a club. He took himself firmly in hand for one mighty effort.

"Now, look here, Mrs. Langham; you listen to me, and keep still till I finish. I don't know where Mr. Langham is, and I don't care. Jean is—was—a friend of mine; she and I took the child from the

nurse, trying to get it back to you; your husband got us arrested, and while we were in the police station, the *nurse* got it again, and *Jean* saw her boarding the train with it, and followed her—with a sprained ankle, too; she's the best sport I ever saw—to get it *back*. She probably has it by now. And you ought to apologize to her for your suspicions, which are wholly unfounded."

This time the explanation got through the thick blond curls that covered Mrs. Langham's ears; and as if it had tapped a spring somewhere in the obscure hinterland of her pretty head, two large tears bubbled spontaneously out of her blue eyes.

"Oh, I do apologize! I do!" she cried. "I ought to have known better than to believe anything bad about *Jean*; she's the best bridge player I ever saw. If *George Langham* isn't on that train, and if *Jean* is, I know my baby's all right. But how are we going to get him? What do we do first?"

She looked up at him with her large, trustful, tear-wet eyes—with that innocent, innate conviction common to children, puppies, and blondes, that humanity is created solely to serve them—and *Clive* realized, with a start, that in spite of himself he was still entangled in the affair. Apparently, it was almost as dangerous to get involved with a woman who had too little initiative as with a woman who had too much.

"Well," he reflected aloud, "I know *Jean* well enough to know that if she hasn't bagged the baby by now, she will within the next five minutes. Since her one idea is to get it to you as quickly as possible, she'll certainly get off at the next station and take the next train back. I should think the best stunt would be to wait right here."

But at this Mrs. Langham gave a little squeak of dismay.

"Oh, we *can't* do that! This train's an express; it doesn't stop again until it gets to Moulton, *ever* so far away, and there won't be a train back from there till *nobody* knows *when*!" She turned to the chauffeur. "When *does* the next train for New York stop here, Hobbs?"

The chauffeur, who, the perfection of well-trained chauffeurhood, had stood in the background as impersonal and as much a part of the landscape as a hitching post during all this colloquy, came suddenly to life to meet the professional exigency.

"Three thirty P.M., ma'am," he said promptly.

"You see! Hours and *hours*. We *can't* sit here; we have to *go*. I hope you're a good fast driver, Mr.—I don't believe I caught your name?"

"Denby. Why, yes, I can get over the ground; but won't your chauffeur drive you?"

"Oh, no! You see, he has to take the new nurse home." She made a slight gesture toward another hitching post, a female one, who stood discreetly dumb and blank at a little distance. "I wouldn't dare leave her *loose* around the town," she added in a confidential tone, "for fear of losing her."

"You've no *idea* how hard it is to get a good nurse. I'll have to send her right up in a taxi with Hobbs, and trust to her falling in love with him or Dunster to keep her until I get back. And you and I will take the coupé and hurry right on after the baby and *Jean*—won't we?"

She looked at him with such perfect confidence that there seemed to be no choice of answers; without a word said, he was definitely committed to another chapter of the infant's saga. It was irksome; in theory it was annoying, for babies had always been among the things that bored him most. Yet he felt no such keen resentment as he might have expected himself to feel; in fact, he felt a certain zest about going on with the adventure, in spite of the fact that it involved the obnoxious *Jean*. It must have been that the baby was a baby of unusual appeal.

"Can we keep pretty close to the railroad?" he asked. "I don't know the way to Moulton."

The chauffeur, who had again ceased to function, came promptly out of his decorous trance to answer.

"You go right along the under-mountain road till you get to the next town," he said usefully, "and then you got to go around a biggish mountain on your right, and then you meet the river, and go parallel to that for a ways; and after that there's plenty of signposts."

"All right; I suppose I can make it. I've driven this kind of car before. Very well, Mrs. Langham, I'm at your service whenever you're ready."

Mrs. Langham promptly waved her henchman toward a taxi, jumped into the coupé, and banged the door shut.

"Hurry, Mr. Denby, hurry!" she urged. "Every minute is a hundred years until I get my baby again. We *must* beat that

horrid old train. We've talked *entirely* too long."

Clive was too well bred to ask her whose obtuseness it was that had made the talking necessary, but he registered the reflection that she, like Jean, considered all the talking she did herself as essential, and all that other people did as a waste of time. Another black mark against women.

Yet, there was something very stimulating to the sympathies about her, too; you couldn't help responding to that touching helplessness, the trusting appeal of those anxious blue eyes, any more than you could help remembering how gallant and how pitiful, in spite of her vicious temper, Jean had looked as she hobbled away from him across the platform. Was it only yesterday that he had hated all women?

He started the car, but not too fast, for he had an idea that safety first was his best motto for the present. Pursuing this principle, he put his head out of the window for a last cautious reconnaissance, wishing to make sure that the coast was clear of all such spokes-in-the-wheel as Mr. Langham and the chief of police.

He saw neither of these, nor any other danger. But just as he was drawing his head in again, he saw the long constable emerge from the station and look straight at him with a look which, separated from its adulterants of native benevolence and whiskers, was defiantly a look of malicious triumph.

Clive pondered this look in a good deal of perplexity as he drove out of the town. Since Jean hobbled aboard the train the constable had vanished from his life; he had no concern with that functionary's mental processes, or possible activities. Why should the constable look after him with malice? Or with triumph? Or with triumph tinged with malice? Or, indeed, why bother to look after him at all?

But Mrs. Langham gave him scant time for reflection. She talked.

She talked. She was one of those excessively pretty women who, accustomed to having their words hung upon for the sake of their beauty, consider—perhaps rightly—that cerebration is a useless waste of labor, and let the words flow on as naturally, and about as significantly, as breathing. Her pretty, tinkling voice streamed into his right ear and out of his left like a brook.

"And so, of course, I dismissed her; and of course I gave her a week's notice, and

an extra week's wages, too—which I didn't need to do, and it was a *great* mistake, because the more you do for those people, the worse they treat you. And so, of course, I went right down to town to get a new nurse; and I must say this one seems very promising; her references were *remarkable*; the only reason I hesitated about her was that she seemed inclined to talk a good deal, and I think that's such a bad thing for a baby, to hear people talking all the time.

"However, I think, with care, I can train her. Of course, when I got here and found that *dreadful* woman was in George Langham's pay, I was *petrified*; George would simply stop at *nothing* to get the baby away from me. But when I realized that Jean was on that same train with her, and George wasn't, I felt *so* relieved, you'll never know. Jean's a *wonder* at getting what she goes for."

Clive's ear continued to receive the soothing strain, but his mind was far away, following another lead. Jean? Yes, she was indeed a wonder at getting what she went for, a wonder at everything she undertook. When she played golf, she was the best girl on the links; when she danced, she was the best dancer on the floor; when she went in for silliness, she was the silliest person there.

And how she had managed this kidnapping affair! How beautifully she had cared for the baby, how boldly she had commandeered the Langham car, how dauntlessly she had hobbled on along every course that seemed to her good! He disliked her, of course; she had been most unreasonable, most outrageously disagreeable to him; but there was no doubt whatever that she was a go-getter.

He stifled a sigh, and came back with an effort to Mrs. Langham, who seemed for some reason to be desiring his attention.

"Don't you think I was *right*?" she said insistently, with an effect of having said it before.

"Eh? Oh, yes, yes. Entirely."

"I *thought* you'd think so. Well, so I said to him, 'George,' I said, 'we've quarreled enough over this baby to run a government,' I said, 'and I'm not going to have him quarreled over all his life as if he were a treaty or a pact or something! I'll never let you see him,' I said, 'and'—oh, Mr. Denby, there's something following us! I just *know* it's George!"

Clive looked behind, and saw, some distance off along the road, which, running beside a long rib of mountain, was fairly straight, an open car with a single occupant. It was too far away for him to distinguish the make of either car or driver, but not too far to see that neither had the glossy opulence which he associated with Mr. Langham. He shook his head.

"No, I'm sure it's not your husband," he said, reassuringly.

"My husband! I should say not. I haven't any husband. I'm *surprised* at you, Mr. Denby—calling George Langham my husband! Anyway, whoever that person is, I want to get *away* from him. Drive faster!"

"But what possible harm can he do us? He has a perfect right to drive along this road; it belongs to the general public."

"I don't care *who* it belongs to, or *what* he has a right to do, I won't *have* that man following me. I *know* George Langham sent him. If you don't hurry up, Mr. Denby, I'll *scream*!"

Her blue eyes suddenly sparkled with spoiled-child anger, and Clive had another of those warm waves of compassion for Mr. Langham. Yet he weakly pursued the same pusillanimous course that Mr. Langham or nearly any other male would have followed in the same exposed picture; he ducked for shelter from the blue fire by doing exactly what she demanded. Stepping on the gas, he shot the little coupé ahead so smartly that Mrs. Langham's irritation was flung back into her throat, and she was left speechless for the first time since they set out.

However, when he looked triumphantly back to see how far they had distanced the other car, to his amazement he saw that it also had increased its speed, and was now coming on at a rate even more rapid than theirs. Momentarily it gained on them. He sped faster, and so did the other car. He turned to take another look; and now it was so close that he recognized both vehicle and occupant. It was the rattletrap "P. D." flivver from Winfield, and it was driven by the long constable.

Remembering that look of triumphant ill will, Clive wasted no time in analyzing the possible reasons for this situation. A little way ahead of them a road branched off to the left. He saw it, and swung into it; then, out of sight of the police car, took the first navigable lane that led from it into

the woods. He said nothing until they were well screened by the trees.

"There!" he said at last, breathlessly, as they bumped along from high spot to high spot. "That 'll hold him for awhile, and when we get through these woods and out where we can see our way, we'll work back to the main road again."

"I *told* you," said Mrs. Langham, lightly leaving her seat, and coming down to it again rather heavily, "it was George—Langham!"

"But it wasn't. It was the policeman from Winfield—the long, thin, Uncle Sam looking one."

"The long, thin policeman from Winfield? But he's a *lamb*! Once he held me up for speeding, and let me off for the very first pair of tears!"

"Well, I don't know what he'd do for your tears, but the fact remains that he arrested Jean and me on Mr. Langham's orders, for bringing your baby back to you."

The blue eyes grew wide and indignant. "Oh, the *horrid* thing! How *did* you get away from him?"

"Jean said the baby was—er—ours—or—at least—hers."

The blue eyes grew cold. "Pretty cheeky of her, I should say," remarked Mrs. Langham, "saying my baby was hers! The *idea*! When I see Jean, I'll tell her what I think of it."

"Well, which idea do you like better," demanded Clive, reflecting that the chief wonder was that Langham had stood her as long as he did, "having Jean pass off the baby as hers, or having the policeman take it back to Mr. Langham?"

"Oh, of course, if you put it *that* way! I didn't mean to be cross, Mr. Denby; I'm sorry. I'm *so* nervous! But I *do* appreciate what you and Jean are doing; I think you're *dear*, both of you; and you may call the baby yours all you *want* to."

"Thanks—thanks a lot—but I don't believe we'll need to any more," said Clive hastily; the thought of assuming the parental position again made him acutely uneasy. But at the same time his irritation melted away in the warmth of the blue-eyed appreciation that now irradiated him. Langham had been a fool to quarrel with her; she was amazingly sweet.

They now had emerged from the woods onto a fairly level road which ran diagonally across the crooked lane they had been

traveling, and Clive turned into it, planning to get back to the highway. But the mountains which had been marching in a solid phalanx at their right had effected an odd change of alignment, and were now directly behind them. Or, perhaps, they had moved, and become that group over at the left; he had taken a very crooked way, and mountains, like women, are variable. He was puzzled; and there was no one to ask, nor any counseling signpost.

"For goodness' sake, *hurry!*" urged Mrs. Langham, as he paused to look about for the next move.

"Trouble is, I don't know where to hurry to. We were to have come to a town, and then gone around a mountain; but we've missed the town by this detour, and I'm dog-goned if I know which mountain is the one."

"Why, it's that mountain over there, of course. He said one on the right, didn't he? And that's the only one on the right for ever so far. *Do hurry up, Mr. Denby!* We've lost a frightful lot of time, and we *must* beat that train!"

"But we won't gain anything if we go the wrong way. I lost my bearings, corkscrewing through those woods."

"Well, I didn't. My sense of direction is *remarkable*; George—Mr. Langham—used to say he never saw one like it. Go ahead until you come to that mountain, and then turn to the right; and for *Heaven's* sake hurry up!"

Clive obeyed; not because he was convinced, but because he had the well-nigh universal masculine desire for peace. Mrs. Langham had now completely recovered her breath, and began again to talk steadily and competently. With an abstracted ear for her, and an uneasy eye for the road, he pursued the mountain, overtook it, and swung around its flank.

"So George—Mr. Langham—and I took the baby and the nurse—the third nurse before this last one, that was"—the undammable stream tinkled on, "and went to the seashore. That was one of the times we weren't quarreling."

"But the baby was cutting a tooth; it was his first one, so the poor little angel hadn't had any practice; and, of course, he cried more or less; and there was a perfectly *horrible* old maid had the next suite, and she told the chambermaid that she *had* thought the foghorn on Misery Island was the greatest affliction she ever had to bear,

but she found the *baby* was *worse*. So, of course, I was *furiously*, and—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Clive. "I see a man, and I want to ask him the way."

"Oh, you needn't bother. I know the way, and this is it. So I said to her—"

"But *I* don't know it; I've got to find out. Just excuse me a minute."

"I tell you," protested Mrs. Langham, with warmth, "it's a *ridiculous* waste of time—*simply absurd!* There's only one way we *could* go. And we have to *hurry!*"

"It's no use to hurry if we're not hurrying the right way," said Clive firmly, "and I'm going to make sure."

He stopped the car by the roadside, where, in front of a dormant farmhouse, a contemplative man sat on a stone wall, dreamily chewing tobacco.

"I say, colonel," Clive accosted him, "where does this road go?"

The man contemplated him thoughtfully, chewed a little while in silence, expectorated, and answered deliberately.

"Don't go nowhere. Jest stays right here."

Clive was not in the mood to be diverted by rustic wit, especially as Mrs. Langham was unconsciously pinching his knee in the stress of her emotion. He shook his head impatiently.

"I mean, where shall *I* get if I go on this way?"

The rural philosopher chewed again.

"Depends," he offered presently, "on how you're goin' on. Some 'll git to heaven the way they're goin' now, some's hell bent for the other place."

At this Mrs. Langham pinched so violently that Clive was barely able to repress a yelp of anguish. Spurred by pain and impatience to ferocity, he leaned from the window with a countenance that would have terrified a ravening wolf, and shouted:

"Stop fooling! Am I on the way to Moulton, or not?"

"Moulton!" repeated the aboriginal, cowed into plain dealing. "I sh'd say not! Not unless ye want to get to China fust."

"Where *do* I strike the right road, then?"

"Turn around an' go back till ye come to a little road goin' off into the woods to your left, an' then foller that till ye reach another road goin' kinder kitty-cornered to it, an' then—"

Mrs. Langham abruptly stopped pinching Clive's knee.

"Great Scott!" interrupted Clive. "Exactly the way we came. Well—much obliged. Good day!"

Making a smart turn, he set about regaining the lost ground. He took a pace that would not have shamed Jean herself; they leaped from bump to bump of the rough ground, and Mrs. Langham, holding to her hat with one hand and the door with the other, was more often out of her seat than in it.

But they traveled now in profound silence. Somebody had to say, "I told you so!" before the way could be cleared for general conversation, and Clive was too magnanimous to say it, and Mrs. Langham not magnanimous enough to say it for him. The miles whizzed by depressingly. They bounced through the wood road and the road that had led them to it, then rejoined the highway at a little distance from the village, and turned to the right around the mountain, which now suddenly appeared in its proper place. They saw no sign of the constable, nothing happened except bumps, and nobody said a word.

"I'm a fool," thought Clive bitterly, "to waste my time on a silly wild-goose chase like this, for a woman who hasn't even the decency to own up when she's wrong! I don't blame Langham. I should think all married men would jump off Brooklyn Bridge. Jean wouldn't do *that*, anyway; she is a good sport. But wasn't that a dirty look she gave me! I should think all single men would jump off, too. Women are a mess, anyway. Men are a mess. Life's a mess." He was even more misanthropic than he had been before the adventure started.

However, when they had skirted the mountain and begun to bowl along the smooth road beside the river, outraged nature had her way, and Mrs. Langham's tongue burst its unnatural fetters.

"Mr. Denby—" it began timidly.

Clive looked around aloofly and coldly.

"Mr. Denby," said Mrs. Langham, laying her hand lightly on his arm, and gazing at him with blue eyes appealing enough to liquefy adamant, "I'm *awfully* sorry. I was *horrid*. I often am, but I *never* mean to be. You *will* forgive me, won't you? You see, I'm *so* nervous about the baby!"

This had the inevitable effect.

"There's nothing to forgive," responded Clive, melting. "We all make mistakes sometimes."

"Oh, aren't you *sweet*!" appreciated Mrs. Langham. "I think it's *wonderful* of you to be so nice about it. If George Langham had a disposition like yours, I'd never have had all this trouble."

Clive felt a sudden strong conviction that George Langham ought to be kicked.

"And now," continued the charming, blue-eyed voice, coaxingly, "you *will* go just the very fastest *possible*, won't you? I just *can't* have that train get in, and not be there! *Please* hurry, dear Mr. Denby! *Please*!"

For all his world-weariness, Clive was a kindly soul; and such an appeal would have made Socrates himself step on the gas. Clive stepped on it. The coupé, which was already going at a sufficiently brisk clip, bounded ahead like the arrow from the bow. The way was clear, the road fairly good; the miles began to smoke behind them so fast that their passage left no record, except on the dial of the speedometer, at which there was no time to look. The river was left behind, and the clustered houses of the city of Moulton began to show in the distance.

All was going well; they were rapidly making up the lost time, and Mrs. Langham had begun to talk again in soft, disjointed sentences—the words blown from her lips by the wind of their passage—

When suddenly, startlingly, a shrill whistle rent the air that they were just about to displace, and a bloodcurdling, khaki clad figure jumped from the foliage by the wayside and stood in the road in front of them.

"Good gosh!" exclaimed Clive. "A trap! Now we're done for."

"Oh, oh! Can't we scoot past him?"

"Not much. Even if he didn't shoot—as he'd have a right to—he'd get our number and have us nabbed the minute we got to the town."

"I wouldn't mind being nabbed, or even shot, after we got the baby. But oh, Mr. Denby, we *must* get him first! Oh, *don't* stop!"

"Better stop now of our own accord than have him stop us with a bullet. All right, officer!"

Making a virtue of necessity, Clive had been slowing down as he spoke, and now came to a neat stop just abreast of the policeman. That functionary looked at him with a stern countenance, unmollified by the prompt obedience.

"All right yourself," he returned severe-

ly. "I guess you know what's comin' to you; and I guess you know you deserve it. Show up your papers."

"Oh, officer! You aren't going to *arrest* us?" cried Mrs. Langham reproachfully.

"I sure am, ma'am. If you weren't goin' fifty miles an hour, I'm a Chinaman."

"But we had a good reason, officer," explained Clive earnestly. "We had to meet a train. Simply *had* to."

"Oh, yes," returned the policeman cynically. "I've heard that kind o' thing before. It's surprisin' how many folks comin' along this road have trains to meet. You can tell the chief all about it when we get to the station; he likes bedtime stories."

"But I assure you, officer," Clive began, "it's the truth. We—"

Mrs. Langham interrupted him, signaling silence with an urgent pinch on the knee. She leaned a little out of the window, and fixed the policeman with her beseeching eyes.

"Officer," she said, "do you know *why* we were trying to catch up with that train? It's because my *baby*—my little baby *boy*—is on it; and he's been *kidnaped*!"

Clive, watching the face of the officer, and fully expecting to see it register a scornful sneer, had a shock of astonishment. The hard-boiled, varnished countenance relaxed a little; then it became limp; then soft; then it melted to mushiness.

Clive blinked; and looking at his companion to find the cause of this phenomenon, he blinked again. As deftly and as effortlessly as a movie actress dabbing on drops of glycerine, she had drowned her blue eyes in limpid tears, which veiled them with irresistible pathos, and hung on her long eyelashes decoratively, like dewdrops on ferns.

Clive instantly, and without hesitation, relinquished the conduct of the situation. There was no need for him here.

"You don't say, ma'am!" exclaimed the officer of the law, in a shaken voice. "Well, well! Ain't that tough?"

"Oh, it is! It's *heartbreaking*. And when I think—that my *precious* baby—may get to that station—and I not be there to save him—oh, I just can't *bear* it!"

The tears overflowed—only two of them; there was no extravagance about her methods—and ran down her smooth cheeks; but her color was all natural, and she did not waste them by wiping them away. She only sat and looked, the image

of lovely woe, at the policeman; and the two teardrops splashed down on her blue frock, and made two spots of an unendurably pathetic aspect on its bosom.

"By jings!" murmured the constable, visibly affected. "I don't blame ye, ma'am. I—it makes me feel bad myself. I—by jings!"

Mrs. Langham gazed at him through another pair of brimming tears.

"Officer," she said tremulously, "you have children of your own. Something tells me so."

"I have, ma'am," replied the officer, also tremulously.

"No wonder you feel for me," she exclaimed, leaning nearer. "I knew, just to look at you, that *you* would never be the man to break a mother's heart! You *will* let me go and get my baby, *won't* you?"

"Why—er—er—well—I—" fumbled the constable, torn between chivalry and duty.

"Oh, I *knew* it!" cried Mrs. Langham.

"I *knew* I wasn't mistaken! Thank you, officer, *thank* you! You'll never regret it—a mother's blessings, a mother's tears—" She implied, "And all that sort of thing, you know," with a misty, enraptured smile, waved her hand at him, and, suddenly withdrawing her head from the window, dealt Clive's knee a merciless thump, and ejaculated in his ear, "Get away, *quick*!"

A good deal startled by the suddenness of the command, Clive obeyed it without question; and in a minute they had left the dazed constable by the roadside, and were again on their way to the town.

"Now," said Mrs. Langham, in a completely composed and practical tone, "drive like the devil!"

Clive shot a glance at her. Her eyes were dry, her expression self-possessed; you would have supposed that tears and she were utterly unacquainted. He shook his head in wonder. Muddled as her mental processes were, the woman was certainly a marvel of efficiency.

They covered the river road at a rapid pace, and entered the small city of Moulton in a few minutes. But here their speed was inevitably decreased, and they lost several more minutes by following a misleading direction to the railway station. Mrs. Langham was now sitting on the edge of her seat, pounding Clive's knee with the rhythmic regularity of a steam pile driver.

"Hurry *up*, hurry *up*!" she kept saying. "We *must* beat that train!"

Clive, who had heard no sound and seen no sign of a train, felt obliged to prepare her for possible disappointment.

"You know, I hardly think we have a chance of beating it," he said. "The motor road isn't as straight as the railroad at best, and, of course, we—er—we did lose a little time. But, even if we do arrive a few minutes late, it won't make any difference. Jean's certain to get out here, because it's the only place she could get out; and she's certain to wait for us, because it's the only thing she can do."

"Yes, that's true. But, oh, I *must* be there to meet them! I feel *sure* something will happen to the baby again if I don't."

"Don't you worry," comforted Clive. "Maybe the train will draw up just as we dash in, and you and the baby will get together in two jumps. But if it doesn't, if it's already gone, you may be sure the first thing we'll see will be the two of them waiting for us on the platform."

They turned another corner, dodged through a busy street of traffic, ran down a slope, and arrived at the railway station. Mrs. Langham was out almost before the car stopped, and Clive only a second later. They looked about breathlessly. There was no one in sight except the usual complement of loafers and functionaries. Hurrying across the platform, they began to inquire, at first at breathless random, then systematically, from the station agent, and the baggage man, and the news dealer, and the bootblack, from anybody who could possibly give them news.

It was all to no purpose. The train had come and gone ten minutes before; the passengers had scattered and disappeared; and nobody had seen, anywhere among them, any trace or any semblance of any Jean or any millionaire baby.

IX

CLIVE and Mrs. Langham stared at each other, agast.

"They never came!" exclaimed Mrs. Langham. "But they *must* have come!"

"Of course they must," agreed Clive. "There's nothing else they could do."

"I don't care *what* those stupid people say, they've *been* here. But where in the *world* can they be now?"

Clive reviewed the situation in his masterly masculine way.

"Obviously, there's only one thing they could have done. Jean knew you were

coming on this train, and of course she knew you'd want to get it—the baby—as soon as possible. She had money with her, I know. She's rented a car and gone to take it to your house."

"Oh, yes, that must be what she's done. But how *stupid* of her not to wait here for us! She'd have *known* we'd come, if she'd used her head at *all*."

For some reason Clive found himself resenting this remark. Nobody knew better than he how unreasonable Jean could be; he smarted still from the unwarranted accusations of her last look; but somehow this comment from her old school friend seemed uncalled for, if not offensive.

"I don't see how she could be expected to know it," he answered stiffly. "It probably seemed to her the most natural thing for you to go home and wait for the baby, and for her to bring it to you there as quickly as possible."

"If she thought I'd go home and *sit* while my baby was being *kidnaped*," observed Mrs. Langham, with heat, "she hasn't got the sense she was *born* with. And I *wish* you wouldn't call my baby 'it.' He's a *him*; he's just as much a person as you are, and I know how much *you'd* like it if I kept calling *you* an it. I don't see what's the *matter* with men!"

Clive ruminated bitterly that it was easy enough to see what was the matter with women; they were completely incased and insulated in self-satisfaction. Jean had run this affair from the word go; Mrs. Langham apparently thought she could run it to the finish; but both of them were willing enough to put all the dirty work on him. There was some excuse for Jean, she really was a born executive—but this little blue-eyed goose! Poor Langham!

They entered the car in strained silence, turned around, and started back toward Mrs. Langham's house. Clive avoided the road where the constable had trapped them, thinking that her tear ducts might not be efficacious in a second encounter, and they were, therefore, constrained to a back road that was full of bumps. At each bump Mrs. Langham gasped audibly in protest; but Clive held to his course with grim determination, asked the way whenever he felt inclined, and reached the Torrington road with a consoling sense of dominance. Women! he thought scornfully. He'd show them if they could run him like a tame tractor.

They approached "The Gables," this time from the Torrington instead of the Winfield side. As they neared the gate, Mrs. Langham broke her unprecedented silence with a little squeal.

"Oo! Look what's ahead of us!"

Clive looked. Down the road, a little beyond the house, speeding toward Winfield, was the glossy sedan in which he and Jean had traveled earlier that morning.

"That's *George Langham's* car!" said Mrs. Langham, in a voice tense with excitement. "And will you *tell* me what it's doing here?"

"I can't tell you what it's doing, but I can tell you how it got here. Jean and I kidnaped it this morning when we kidnaped the baby, and when the police got after us, we brought it to your house. George Langham must have got on the trail and come for it."

"That's just *like* him. He wouldn't leave anything of his for *five seconds* in the same neighborhood with me. He makes me *furios*! He's the most *horribly* suspicious person you ever saw. What did *he* come in, do you suppose?"

The distraction had banished their hostility, and they began to talk again. Clive explained the part played by Jean's car in the morning's happenings, and Mrs. Langham listened with absorption, and responded with volubility. They were, therefore, deep in conversation when they swung into the driveway of "The Gables," so deep that they failed to note, at first, the impression created by their arrival.

As Clive had anticipated, Jean's roadster, considerably battered, but more able-bodied than he would have thought possible a few hours earlier, stood in front of the house, and grouped around it, in animated conference, stood the chauffeur, the butler, the new nurse, and the maid who had supplied hospitality to the constable. Their conference, at least, was animated until they perceived the pair in the coupé; then a smothering silence fell upon them, and they rolled significant eyes at each other.

"That's it," said Clive, pleased to find his conjecture right, "he came in Jean's car. His chauffeur fixed it up so it would run. Now she can have it to go home in."

But Mrs. Langham's chief concern was not with Jean. She put her pretty head out of the window and called to the group of her henchmen:

"Is the baby here?"

There was an instant's uncomfortable silence. Then the butler answered, with some constraint:

"No, madam. At the moment, the boby is not at 'ome."

"Not here!" cried Mrs. Langham. "Then where *is* he?"

The butler gave a deprecatory cough. "We 'ad thought, madam, that 'e was with you."

"Oh, and I thought he was here! I thought Miss Adair had brought him! What *did* Mr. Langham say?"

The group at the steps exchanged pregnant glances; and Clive, who had now brought the coupé to a standstill behind the roadster, and was free to observe the other aspects of the situation, was struck by an expression of uneasy reserve common to all their faces.

"Well," interposed Clive, addressing the butler, "what *did* Mr. Langham say? Come, we want to know."

The butler coughed again. "I'd rather not sy, sir, in the presence of ladies."

Mrs. Langham seized the words with flashing eyes.

"In the presence of ladies! Why not? Did he *swear*?"

There was another pregnant pause, and the glances were laden with gloating reminiscence. After a moment the butler answered discreetly:

"Did he not, madam?"

"Well, I think he ought to be *ashamed* of himself, swearing about a poor, innocent baby," said Mrs. Langham, turning to Clive; "and if there ever *was* any doubt in my mind about letting him see the poor lamb, this *settles* it. Let's get away!"

The warmth of her emotion made her remark audible to all the group, and their constrained excitement increased. The chauffeur, hesitating, but apparently driven by an impulse of sex loyalty strong enough to overcome his professional inhibitions, stepped forward, fingering his cap.

"Beg pardon, ma'am. 'Twasn't about the baby, ma'am. 'Twas about—about—you, ma'am."

Mrs. Langham stared at him. "About me! He was swearing about *me*?"

"Yes, ma'am. Somebody at the station told him they seen a strange man meet you and drive off with you in your car, an' when he heard that he came here in a tearin' hurry an' questioned me—beg pardon, ma'am—and when I told him it was true;

o' course I told him you went for the baby, but I couldn't deny it about the gentle—he—well—"

"I'll say he did," murmured the chambermaid gloatingly. The new nurse gave a giggle, quickly suppressed.

Mrs. Langham turned back to Clive with flashing eyes.

"You hear that?" she said tensely. "That's the way he treats me! Suspecting me when I can't defend myself, and *swearing* about me behind my back! I'm absolutely *done* with him!"

Clive Denby leaned across to the sources of information.

"We saw him going away just as we drove up. Did he say anything about the baby?"

The butler answered. "'E did, sir. 'E said 'e expected to acquire 'im at the 'ands of the police. But, beggin' your pardon, it was about the madam 'e was most—er—animated. 'E said 'e was goin' to consult the police about 'er."

"He *was!*" exclaimed Mrs. Langham, with blue flashes. "We'll see about that. Mr. Denby, drive to the police station this instant."

Clive executed a swift turn, and dashed into the road to Winfield. He was interested in Mrs. Langham only academically, in the baby only humanely, and in Jean, of course, not at all; but he did want—just out of curiosity—to see what was going to happen at the police station. The servants stared after them with round, respectful eyes; but as they left the gate Clive thought he heard the new nurse relapse into giggles.

It seemed a long time since he and Jean had left the Winfield station and the little red brick headquarters of law and order; but it was, in point of fact, barely an hour, and the scenery remained quite unchanged. Clive thought of his first visit to the spot, of Jean's coolness and quickness of wit, and how deftly she had saved them both from durance.

He thought of his second visit, of Jean's courage and determination, and how dauntlessly she had limped to the rescue of the baby. A remarkable girl, Jean, for all her vicious disposition. Strange she hadn't been either at Moulton or at Mrs. Langham's. One couldn't help wondering what had become of her. One couldn't help worrying—just a trifle.

As for Mrs. Langham, on the way from

the house she had talked incessantly, and at a tempo that indicated considerable tension; a little about Jean, a good deal about the baby, and an incalculable amount about Mr. Langham, his sins, his negligences and omissions; one gathered that she felt for Mr. Langham a disapproval even stronger than Clive's for Jean. But as they approached their destination, she fell suddenly silent, and began again her unconscious chastisement of Clive's long-suffering knee, kneading it with knuckles that displayed astonishing power.

There was no one at the railway station except a sparse assortment of habitués; but in front of the little police station, empty, stood the shiny sedan. At sight of it Mrs. Langham pinched Clive until he thought her identity would be registered on his knee in black and blue finger-prints.

"Look at that!" she cried. "That man's in the police station. I'm going to go in and—and—confront him!"

"What good would that do?" returned Clive. "You wouldn't gain anything by it. I don't suppose he has Jean and the baby in his pockets."

"No, but I'd have the satisfaction of—of confronting him. Of telling him what I *think* of him."

"I suppose you've done that before," remarked Clive, surreptitiously moving his knee and rubbing it tenderly.

"Yes, but never so well as I could do it now. But—oh—look! Look who's coming! Oh—oh—why, he's bringing them! He's got them!"

Clive followed her excited gaze, and saw, approaching the police station from the opposite direction, a small and mournful procession, consisting of a dilapidated flivver truck, a length of patched rope, and a smaller flivver, apparently totally disabled. At first he wondered what possible interest this sad spectacle could have for Mrs. Langham. But, after a moment's gazing, he discovered what her keen eye had detected at the first glance. The rear car was the official vehicle of the police department of Winfield, the person behind its idle wheel was the long constable, the person beside him was the baby, and the person beneath the person beside him was Jean.

The action that ensued was rapid. As the battered cavalcade drew up at the police station, the coupé stopped in its tracks; Mrs. Langham spilled out of one side, and Clive out of the other; they left both doors

swinging wide to the breeze, and rushed to meet the newcomers; and at the same instant a large and handsome man materialized in the station-house door.

"*Precious!*" cried Mrs. Langham, flinging herself upon the baby and snatching it from Jean's arms. "Oh, diddums takums away from ums poor muvver? Darling booful adorablums!"

For a moment the impetuosity of her onslaught seemed to have paralyzed all the other participants in the scene. They stood motionless and speechless, as if deprived of breath. But not for long. Moving almost as rapidly as she had done, the large man projected himself purposefully from the doorway, and seized the mother and child in a comprehensive embrace.

"Evelyn!" he ejaculated. "I've got you again—thank the Lord!"

Clive, remembering the sentiments Mrs. Langham had just expressed, and acutely aware of the contusions on his knee, was so apprehensive for the rash man's safety that he forgot his own plans and stepped forward protectingly. But, instead of throwing her husband to the pavement, the astonishing woman was looking at him with a new, brilliant illumination in the blue eyes.

"I thought—it was the baby—you wanted!" she said.

"I wanted him for the sake of getting you. Evelyn, I can't stand this any longer. Evelyn, darling, let's make up. All this stuff you've been hearing is just a lot of foolishness I went in for because I was so sore and miserable about you. You're all I care about—you and the little chap. Let me have you again, Evelyn!"

A small but beautiful geyser of tears suddenly welled up over Mrs. Langham's blue illumination, and, apparently liquefied by it, she dropped in a yielding mass against her husband's shoulder.

"Oh, George!" she cried. "I love you *such* a lot! I've never done anything *else*! Oh, George!"

Another instant's pause ensued. There was something so forthright and direct about the methods of this child of nature that more sophisticated people were always knocked galley-west by them, and needed a little time to recover.

"Well!" a crisp voice cut in on the tab-leau. "I seem to have gone and made a jailbird of myself all in vain!"

Clive turned with a start; something about that voice caused an odd flip-flap inside his chest. There, at the curb, obviously in the custody of the long policeman, stood Jean. She looked tired and wan; her gay frock was the worse for wear, her small face pinched and pale; but her eyes shone defiantly bright.

"I've been under a misapprehension," she added with a touch of gay bitterness. "I believed you, Evelyn. I thought that your husband really was a brute, and that you were really through with him, and that the baby really needed rescuing. I apologize all around."

"Oh, you needn't, Jean!" returned Mrs. Langham sagely, from the shelter of her husband's embrace. "You really did help. If I hadn't been so worried about the baby I shouldn't have been so ready to forgive George, and if he hadn't been so upset about Mr. Denby, he wouldn't have been so anxious to make it up with me. It's all turned out *beautifully*."

"In that case," remarked Jean, a trifle dryly, "you might loose my shackles before you revert to your beautiful home. This policeman thinks I'm your absconding nurse; he had the train stopped at the next village and arrested me, and he says I've got to spend the night in a cell."

"What's that? Foolishness!" exclaimed Mr. Langham. "We'll see about that!"

"Then see about it—quick," said Jean. "I've had—almost—enough—foolishness!" And, to every one's surprise, Jean the self-reliant, Jean the go-getter, swayed on her one well foot as if she were about to fall.

Mr. Langham hastily extricated himself from his family entanglements, and started to her side. "Catch her!" he exclaimed. "Support her!"

But his rapid advance was barred by an unexpected obstacle. Clive had jumped forward like a stone from a catapult; brushing aside all competitors, and in less time than it takes to tell, he stood beside his fellow conspirator with a protecting arm around her.

"No, sir!" he said firmly to the imminent Langham. "Nobody's going to get a chance to support Jean but me!"

Jean, steadying herself against him, looked up at him with a mischievous smile lighting her tired face.

"Well, you know I've been telling you you needed a real job!" said she.